

INTIMATE SELVING AND HEALING IN WOMEN'S WRITING OF  
POSTCOLONIAL WARFARE

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of English and Comparative Literature

Chapel Hill  
2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

**MICHAEL JAMES RULON: Intimate Selving and Healing in Women's Writing of  
Postcolonial Warfare  
(Under the direction of Martine Antle)**

This dissertation explores previously unexamined modes of violence and healing in women's fiction of the Algerian Revolution, the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, and the First and Second Indochina Wars. I propose that memory and testimony alone cannot constitute a complete approach to healing the psychic wounds of warfare. Instead, I identify the violence of war and its subsequent healing processes in terms of intimate selving, a concept described by Lebanese-American anthropologist Suad Joseph. Intimate selving is a process of forming a self in relation to others in a way that recognizes the value of both the individual and the collective and places emphasis on the interaction between the two. I define the healthy self, based on Joseph's concept, as a self that is embedded in a relational matrix of selves that is neither individualist nor collectivist, in which selves mutually shape each other, and in which each individual maintains a sense of agency as a result of this network. From this basis, I identify the ways in which various forms of violence, including torture, rape, imprisonment, and exile, disrupt this construction of a networked self, and I compare the different ways in which female characters in fictional works by Assia Djebar, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Linda Lê attempt to heal their psychic wounds through the process of intimate selving. I situate each work in

its historical and social context in order to determine the ways in which such contexts influence the forms of violence that take place during warfare and to understand the reasons for the success and failure of various characters' healing processes. In doing so, I illustrate and defend Joseph's contention that intimate selving is a historically and culturally specific process that may be a necessary tool for survival in certain social contexts.

To my parents, Steven and Virginia Rulon and to Mary and Jim Montgomery, who  
always encouraged me to do my best.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This project could not have come to fruition without the support and guidance of a large number of people. First, I would like to thank my director, Martine Antle, for her mentoring and for the many opportunities that she has provided me over the years. I am also grateful to my committee members, Karen Booth, Dominique Fisher, Diane Leonard, and Yaron Shemer, for their thoughtful feedback. I have benefited from the support of many other members of the UNC-Chapel Hill faculty as well, including (but by no means limited to) Sahar Amer, Jan Bardsley, Nadia Yaqub, Nasser Isleem, Hannelore Jarausch, Glynis Cowell, Hassan Melehy, and Gregg Flaxman. These people have supported me in both my teaching and research, and I could not have completed graduate school without their encouragement.

I am also fortunate to have found a nurturing group of friends who have made the writing process much less arduous than it could have been. They are far too numerous to list here, but I am nonetheless appreciative.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank my family for standing behind me throughout ten long years of graduate study.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Identifying and Healing the Wounds of War**

#### **Objectives**

Historically, literary scholarship on warfare has largely ignored women's agency, focusing heavily on representations of women as victims of violence, rather than as active participants. In recent decades, this has changed dramatically, with a number of works (discussed below) addressing women's participation in war, as well as the ways in which women cope with the violence of warfare. The purpose of this dissertation is to add to that growing body of scholarship. My goal is to offer an alternative to healing through testimony, which is by far the dominant mode of healing addressed in contemporary scholarship of women and war. In particular, I will examine intimate selving, a concept proposed by Lebanese-American anthropologist and sociologist Suad Joseph, as a means of healing the psychic wounds of war.

This dissertation will contribute to literary scholarship in a number of ways. First, it will expand the understanding of healing in women's literature of warfare beyond the discourse of memory and testimony that dominate current scholarship. Moreover, this is one of a very small number of studies that focuses on literary representations of healing; most critics currently focus on the writing process itself as healing. In addition, studies of literature of warfare generally focus on one single country or author, whereas this study uses comparative methodology in order to better understand the ways in which modes of

violence and healing result from specific social and cultural contexts. Finally, while Assia Djebar is widely studied, there is currently little scholarship on Hanan al-Shaykh and particularly on Linda Lê. By comparing these three authors, I hope to highlight the importance of all three of them and to bring al-Shaykh and Lê more fully into the discourse of postcolonial women's literature.

This introduction will begin with a summary of the critical and historical background of scholarship on women and warfare, followed by a literature review. After that, I will lay out the main questions addressed in the dissertation and explain the theoretical basis for my analysis. Finally, I will provide an outline of the structure of the dissertation.

### **Critical and Historical Background**

The history of colonialism and its aftermath is a history of violence and war. Certainly, this includes physical violence and conventional warfare, but to acknowledge such violence is to acknowledge only a part of the damage of colonialism. As Martinican-born psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon observes, colonialism is a form of insidious psychic and social violence, and the process of decolonization is a form of counter-violence. In the opening to his work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he postulates that:

National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever name is used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event. At whatever level we study it—individual encounters, a change of name for a sports club, the guest list at a cocktail party, members of a police force or the board of directors of a state or private bank—decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one “species” of mankind for another. (1)

Colonialism is, at its most fundamental level, a form of warfare against the psyche and the self of the colonized. Although the physical violence of colonization is much more visible, it is the psychic violence that is truly essential to the colonial project. In order for a person to be colonized, the colonized person's sense of self must be destroyed in order to replace the free self with a new, broken, colonized self. But colonialism attacks not only the individual self; as Fanon notes, the colonial project also targets the collective self. Colonialism is an attack against the societal bonds that form a nation. The colonizer attacks the economic, social, and political structures that create a cohesive nation of free individuals and replaces them with structures that place the colonized nation in a subordinate position to that of the colonizing power. The pre-colonial collective self—whether it be nation, tribe, family, or otherwise—must be destroyed in order to replace it with a new, subservient collective self that is subsumed by the imperial identity.

Decolonization is thus a form of counter-violence that consists of both the rejection of the colonized self and the re-formation of an independent self. Decolonization is a form of two-pronged warfare that consists of both destruction—the destruction of the oppressive power—and healing.

However, if the history of colonization and decolonization is one of warfare, the narrative of warfare, particularly in the fields of history and literary/cultural studies, has historically been a narrative of men. Despite the increasing visibility of women as both military and civilian participants in war, they are often excluded from the national narrative that emerges after decolonization. As miriam cooke notes in her article “Arab Women Arab Wars” (1994), the Algerian revolution marked a paradoxical period for women in terms of warfare. On the one hand, cooke observes that “[d]uring the Algerian

Revolution, as well as in pre-1967 Israel, Arab women fought, but they fought as men . . . (14-15). She adds that “[t]he Algerian Revolution of 1954-62 provides a paradox: it set a precedent for women’s visibility in national struggle, yet it has come to be regarded as also the source of their ills in the patriarchal postcolonial society to which it gave birth” (15). Although women did not necessarily find liberation from male oppression through the revolution, they did actively participate in the war. While women generally fought as men, cooke does describe in this article one way in which Arab women fought as women, “donating their bodies to the cause by alternately dressing as French women so that they may place bombs in the nouvelle ville and then reveiling so that they might hide the bombs they were moving around the medina . . .” (17). The female body was an essential tool of the Algerian resistance, and the veil, often reviled by Western feminists as a tool of male oppression, allowed Arab women to participate in the war *as women* for the first time in modern history. cooke elaborates in her book *Women Claim Islam* (2001):

...there is one war-related certainty: women are involved in postcolonial wars in a way that was never before so clear. Women may have always been with men in war as nurses, as camp followers, as cross-dressing soldiers, but they have not before fought *as women*. [cooke’s italics] During anticolonial wars in Asia and Africa women were represented as guerilla fighters, hijackers, and organizers of local resistance movements. More recently, as in the Palestinian popular uprising, women have fought as mothers, confronting the soldiers with their maternal bodies so as to disable conventional means of violence. (7)

There is no question that war is not solely the domain of men. If this is the case, then, it should logically follow that scholarship on warfare, as well as the literary representation of war, would thoroughly address the many ways in which warfare impacts women. Moreover, there should be an abundant body of literature that depicts the varied ways in which women participate in warfare, and these texts should be widely discussed in

literary criticism. Indeed, works on warfare should ideally treat women and men with equal attention. However, to date the scholarship on women and war across disciplines is very limited.

## **Literature Review**

Within the past two decades, a small number of important works on women, war, and violence have been published, particularly works focusing on postcolonial warfare. The most important of these works will be discussed below. Many of these books focus on the comfort women: women, mainly Korean, who were sent to work in forced prostitution camps by the Japanese Army during World War II. Although the war ended in 1945, the comfort women's stories were largely unknown to the general public until 1991, when several of the survivors of these camps sued the Japanese government (Hicks 7). Critical and historical works on the comfort women place a great deal of emphasis on testimony as a means of healing. Australian historian George Hicks opens his book, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (1994) by discussing the history and impact of the comfort women's testimony:

The plight of comfort women was not of major concern to the powers fighting World War II. Nor has it proved of interest to its historians. There is no monument to the unknown comfort woman as there are monuments everywhere to the unknown soldier.

It has taken half a century for these women's ruined lives to become a human rights issue. There were thirty years between Japanese journalist Senda Kako's groundbreaking discovery work, and the setting up of hotlines in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and South Korea, to encourage women to come forward.

From the late 1980's, women's groups in Korea and Japan began to organise to force the issue onto the political agenda. The first ex-comfort women began publicly to testify to their ordeals. In story after story, what has slowly and painfully emerged is a picture of a large-scale, officially-organized system of rape by the Imperial Japanese Forces.

Thousands of women, from young village girls to older professionals, an estimated 80 per cent of them Korean, were part of the comfort system across Asia.

Kim Hak Sun was the first former comfort woman to announce she was willing to publicly tell her story, as part of legal action against the Japanese government. Her example gave others the courage to join her in a class action which was launched in the Tokyo District Court on 6 December 1991. The women are demanding compensation, as well as Japanese government admission that force was used to recruit them...

In February 1993, a group of Japanese scholars called on their government to break a long taboo and allow school history books to cover atrocities committed during Japan's colonial rule in Korea, from 1910 to 1945. Until now, the Education Ministry has kept any reference to comfort women out of the nation's textbooks.

As women continue to speak out, this deliberate historical blindness will become harder to sustain. Their stories will become part of the larger story of World War II. (11-12)

Hicks' comparison between comfort women and soldiers is striking; the lack of monuments to the unknown comfort women would seem to suggest that women's stories are not historically significant. Hicks, however, sees the omission of women's stories from the history of World War II as unacceptable. More important than his mention of a memorial, though, is his emphasis on testimony and memory as a means of addressing past wrongs. However, Hicks does not propose testimony as a means of healing so much as a means to provoke political action and to bring the abusers to justice through the Japanese legal system. Certainly this is an important goal; as Mary Layoun observes in her book *Wedded to the Land?: Gender, Boundaries, and Nationalism in Crisis* (2001), such testimony is an essential tool for inducing systemic changes that, in theory, would preserve women from future atrocities such as the comfort stations. By sharing their stories, women can insert themselves into the dialogue of nationalism and thus challenge the male hegemony of which they had been victims. Layoun explains:

[Women's] narrative strategies suggest that the battle over who gets to tell the story of what happened—and in the telling critically shape the what-

happened itself—is a complex and variously waged one. In that battle, however apparently decisive its outcome at a given moment, other narratives of what happened do not necessarily or inevitably just fold up and disappear. They sometimes manage not only to survive at the margins, they even insinuate themselves in the heart of dominant narratives themselves. (7-8)

Voicing their stories helps women not only challenge the false accounts of their experiences; it helps them to challenge the ideology that led to their oppression in the first place. It is no accident that Layoun speaks of women's struggle for a voice in terms of battle and warfare; warfare for women is often a dual struggle. First there is the official war, then there is the war for recognition for women's contributions to and losses from war.

Suzanne O'Brien opens the introduction to her translation of Yoshimi Yoshiaki's *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II* (2000; original published in 1995) by noting that

[f]or more than sixty years now, women enslaved by the Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War have paid a terrible price to ensure the comfort of Japanese people... In the years since Japan's defeat, these women have lived with the physical and emotional scars of their enslavement in silence. That silence, enforced by patriarchal power and discrimination in both Japan and their own countries, bought Japan a comfortable four-decade respite from facing its responsibility for its war crimes. Only in the 1990's, when survivors of the comfort stations began coming forward to speak about their ordeals, did the exorbitant human price they have paid for Japan's comfort become clear. Through their courage and activism, survivors have forced the Japanese government and public opinion throughout Asia to reconceive that price as a debt Japan must acknowledge and attempt to redeem. (1)

O'Brien's language is interesting, because she treats mental health almost as a commodity; Japan requisitioned the women's well-being for the comfort of the nation. By sharing their stories, the survivors of the comfort stations are demanding repayment of Japan's debt to them, a repayment that is to take the form of public admission of guilt.

Once again, testimony is proposed as a means of countering the psychic damage of war, though it is notable that O'Brien places greater emphasis than Hicks on silence; indeed, O'Brien almost describes the comfort women's silence as one of their war wounds, a continuation of the torture that they endured in the camps.

The Middle East is another area that has been the subject of a number of books on women and warfare; within the space of two years (1994-1996) miriam cooke published three books on this topic. The first of these, *Blood into Ink: South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War* (1994), co-edited with Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, is a collection of poems, short stories, and novel excerpts spanning a period from 2300 B.C to 1992. Interestingly, the editors chose to title the two sections of the book "Remembering" and "Waging Peace," a choice that seems to confirm the importance of memory for women in the wake of warfare, as well as confirming Virginia Woolf's argument that war is the domain of men (and peace, implicitly, that of women).<sup>1</sup> In addition, Meena Alexander, in her foreword to the collection, draws a parallel between the postcolonial struggle for freedom and the fight for women's rights. She observes:

The struggle for women's rights, in any case, flowed side by side with the post-colonial struggles for freedom. Even as girlfriends I grew up with in Khartoum marched with men in the streets, demanding a solution to the "Southern Question," so these voices, strengthened, were raised against the horrors of clitoridectomy, and varying, personal decisions were made on the spot, whether to cover oneself in it or not. In India, where I returned in the early seventies, a powerful feminism that sought to rewrite the nation in terms of a viable existence for women was taking shape. Friends in Delhi organised against bride burning; friends in Hyderabad collected the stories of women who were active in the armed uprising of the Telengana movement. Within me, too, was the awareness that Gandhi, the

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<sup>1</sup> This dichotomy seems to be confirmed by a number of books on women and peace; among these are Harriet Hyman Alonso's *Peace as a women's Issue* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993), Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), and *Women Against War*, a collection of personal accounts compiled by the Women's Division of Soka Gakkai (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1986).



apostle of nonviolence, had, in the course of his experiments in community living on Tolstoy Farm in South Africa and in Sabermati Ashram in Ahmedabad, cut off the hair of young women he suspected of sexual misconduct. What place did women have, I wondered, in the new world?

The complexities that underlie women's writing need to be understood in relation to the constraints of power, both patriarchal and colonial. It is through such constraints that the woman's voice works, translating violence. (xiv)

Alexander posits here that not only is war the domain of men, but so too is colonialism.

Indeed, the struggle for women's rights may be seen as a struggle against the male colonization of women, and in the former colonies, the male oppressors may very well be the same men with whom the women fought against the colonial powers.

Moreover, the editors of this volume underscore the central role that women—and even gender itself—plays in war. They open their introduction by noting:

The war myths of many cultures tell of women who are victims and of men who are heroes, of women who are passive and men who are active. But these are, after all, only myths. The fact is that women have always been in war. The women soldiers George Bush sent to fight in the 1991 Gulf War did not constitute an unprecedented break in the ways wars have been fought. They merely exemplified the fact that women are increasingly represented as participating in war: U.S. women marines carrying a "full pack" on their way to Saudi Arabia, Israeli military women, Palestinian mothers with their daughters and sons at barricades, Argentinian mothers protesting their sons' and grandsons' disappearance, Pakistani women at target practice, Sri Lankan woman caught up in communal violence. (1)

Though women have played diverse roles in warfare throughout history—roles that span both the military and the domestic/civilian—it is only in recent years that these roles have been made visible and examined by scholars and the media. The omission of women's stories from the war narrative, cooke and Rustomji-Kerns argue, occurs because war is a heavily gendered phenomenon. They explain:

These images and voices come at a time when the culture of war is increasingly under investigation. Throughout the 1980s, feminist scholars revisited wars in history to study their causes and outcomes as well as the ways in which they were fought. Their findings revealed that although war has always been neatly classified as genderless, it is in fact one of the most highly gendered human activities. This new scholarship shows how the deliberate omission of women—except as nurses, long-suffering wives, mothers, sisters, and campfollowers—from the story of war has allowed the fiction of an ungendered domain to persist.

Although stories of World War II did include women, they were represented as mere substitutes for men. They rallied to the national cause, and they filled in for the heroes. Authorities saluted these women as though they were extraordinary and new, as though they were doing a job of which only men were capable. Many men and women longed for the war to end so that the women might return to their natural domain, the home, where they could resume their invisible role as the family support. Their return to the home symbolized the return of peace and the restoration of men to their visible roles as social managers. (1)

These observations are an important motivation for this project; despite the flimsiness of the binary of the male sphere of war and the female sphere of the domestic, even at the end of the twentieth century, the notion that women may play an active role in warfare, and have indeed done so throughout history, is suppressed. Women's participation in war is relegated to a few socially acceptable roles, and any deviation from these roles is seen as exceptional and a disruption of the social order. This is important because if women's participation in war is invisible, then so too is their pain. Even if testimony is not the only means of healing women's war wounds, it is a necessary part of the healing process, as it is not possible to heal wounds without first acknowledging that these wounds exist.

cooke further dissects the war/domestic binary in her book *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (1996). The title alone underlines the historical omission of women's voices from the war narrative and expresses the importance of integrating these voices in the history of war. Indeed, cooke notes, the

Lebanese Civil War is a logical starting point for such a project. She explains the effect of the war on Lebanon's literary activity:

Before the war, Lebanon had been a literary center attracting writers from many parts of the Arab world. There were numerous publishing houses, literary salons and journals. Poetry here, as elsewhere in the Arab world, was considered newsworthy. But in this literary ferment only a very few women figured.

However, by 1976 the situation had changed. The war had spawned extensive literary activity—and the most prominent and numerous actors were women. How did this happen? Why were women writing? What effect did writing have on these women? How did war, traditionally regarded as a male activity both experientially and literarily, shape women's consciousness? And what did "the history of women during that period reveal about the politics of war?" (1)

As Lebanon is a nation in which literature is considered a central part of society, the surge in women writers during and after the civil war is not merely a phenomenon of academic interest; it is in fact evidence of a social and political shift, a shift in the way we understand gender roles in warfare and in the way in which war is remembered and recorded. cooke further examines this phenomenon in *Women and the War Story*, which explores women's writings on other Arab wars of the late twentieth century.

Four other notable volumes on women and warfare have been published within the past twenty years. The first, *Gendering War Talk* (1993), edited by cooke and Angela Woollacott, is a collection of essays that grew out of an institute on war and gender held at Dartmouth College in 1990. These interdisciplinary analyses of war and gender dissect the language that is used to speak about war, the politics of representation, and the gendered mythology of war. Laura L. O'Toole and Jessica R. Schiffman's volume, *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (1997), is a collection of essays and literary works that trace the history and causes of gendered violence, including rape, domestic violence, and pornography. *Frontline Feminisms* (2000), edited by Marguerite

R. Waller and Jennifer Rycenga, brings together thirty-one essays from a variety of different fields, all of which examine the ways in which feminist criticism can address warfare and other forms of gendered violence. Finally, Daniela Gioseffi's anthology, *Women on War: An International Anthology of Writings from Antiquity to the Present* (2003), brings together women's literary writings on warfare, much like *Blood into Ink*, but with a more global perspective.

### **Main Questions, Critical/Theoretical Basis**

Throughout this rapidly-developing body of scholarship, one subject that has not been sufficiently examined is the question of women's modes of healing in the wake of warfare. As discussed above, virtually every work on women and healing or violence and healing posits memory and/or testimony as the most important mode of healing. In this dissertation, I will argue that the process of intimate selving as described by Suad Joseph is another important means of healing the wounds of postcolonial warfare. Joseph explains the concept of the intimate self in comparison to the idealized Western notion of the autonomous self:

Western psychological theory has focused on the analysis and conditions for the emergence of a bounded, autonomous, and separate self. Such an individualized self has been assumed to be the hallmark of maturity in most Western psychodynamic theorizing. The central site for the construction of the mature individualized self has been iconized as a nuclear family that includes one father, one mother, and their joint children. That other models of selfhood and other sites of construction of self exist in the West and other parts of the world has long been recognized, most especially by anthropologists. To a large extent, however, Western psychodynamic theory has dysfunctionalized, even pathologized, notions of selving that do not conform to the individualized self.

Many feminists and critical theorists, particularly scholars of color, during the 1980s and 1990s have questioned this homogenizing strategy of

Western psychology. Working on questions of self, identity, gender, ethnicity, and race, many scholars have argued that these accounts of self negate or devalue the realities of cultural difference, hybridity, and the heterogeneity found globally and even in Western societies. They have suggested a need for greater complexity and specificity in the analysis of self and identity. (1)

For Joseph, an analysis of the individual must not treat the self as an isolated unit, but rather as a part of an interconnected network of selves. Moreover, it is important to place such networked selves within a cultural context, as the forms and values of such networks vary from culture to culture.

Joseph goes on to discuss the notion of intimate selving as a specific form of relational selving:

This book is about historically and culturally specific constructs of relationality in the context of intimate relationships in families in the Arab world. It is about intimate relationality as a foundational framework, underwriting notions of self that do not conform to the individualist, separative, bounded, autonomous constructs subscribed to in much of Western psychodynamic theory. It is about selves woven through intimate relationships that are lifelong, which transform over the course of personal and social history and which shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self. It is about notions of maturity that valorize rather than pathologize the embeddedness of the self and other. It is about selves in which embeddedness still encompasses agency. It is about notions of self and relationality that are gendered because of culturally specific (not universal) notions of gendered child “development” and because of locally specific and changing dynamics of power. It is about notions of relational selfhood that exist side by side with individualist and other notions of self in the same society and even within the same person. (2)

The intimate self, according to Joseph, is a form of relationality that is pathologized by the Western hegemony. The intimate self relies upon a relationship with the other that is both central to and necessary for the self without subsuming the self in the other or vice-versa. For Joseph, the healthy self is one that exists in harmony with the other and is strengthened by the presence of the other. Although Joseph specifically discusses the

intimate self within the context of Arab families, the concept can be extended to describe a wide variety of relational matrices.

I have identified six specific attributes of intimate selving that will be important to examine in this dissertation. The first is that intimate selving is not about bounded, autonomous selves.<sup>2</sup> The second is that intimate selving is a dynamic, reactive, and mutual process of selving, rather than a one-sided process.<sup>3</sup> The third is that intimate selving is a non-hierarchical form of embeddedness that encompasses agency.<sup>4</sup> The fourth is that intimate selving is neither an individualist nor a collectivist process, but rather one that emphasizes connectivity that does not subsume individual selves.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, modes of intimate selving are culturally and historically specific; it is not a uniform process that occurs in the same ways across time and space.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Joseph

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<sup>2</sup> “It is about intimate relationality as a foundational framework, underwriting notions of self that do not conform to the individualist, separative, bounded, autonomous constructs subscribed to in much of Western psychodynamic theory” (*IS* 2); “Relationality, then, becomes, not an explanation of dysfunctionality but rather a description of a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding, and sociability.” (9)

<sup>3</sup> “It is about selves woven through intimate relationships that are lifelong, which transform over the course of personal and social history and which shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self” (2); “I, like Catherine Keller, use connectivity to imply ‘an activity or an intention,’ rather than a state of being.” (12)

<sup>4</sup> “It is about notions of maturity that valorize rather than pathologize the embeddedness of self and other. It is about selves in which embeddedness still encompasses agency.” (2) ; “Connectivity necessitates neither inequality in general (hierarchy) nor the subordination of women and juniors in particular (patriarchy).” (12); “The agency of the self is situated, contextual, and relational. The actors are discussed as embedded in webs of relationships that co-shape their desires, interests, ambitions, and behavior. Both shaped and shaping, the self, in these depictions, is neither individualist nor collectivist, but absorbing and actively defining self and other, each of which shifts as the actor acts.” (15)

<sup>5</sup> “It is about notions of relational selfhood that exist side by side with individualist and other notions of self in the same society and even within the same person.” (2) ; “I suggest a construct that is neither individualist nor corporatist, but relational. It is productive to view persons in Arab societies as embedded in relational matrices that shape their sense of self but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency.” (11)

<sup>6</sup> “This book is about historically and culturally specific constructs of relationality in the context of intimate relationships in families in the Arab world” (2); “It is about notions of self and relationality that are gendered because of culturally specific (not universal) notions of gendered child ‘development’ and because of locally specific and changing dynamics of power” (2)

constructs intimate selving as a process that may be necessary for survival in certain cultural contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Using Joseph's notion of the intimate self, I intend to examine the ways in which war wounds women's sense of a connected self and the way in which women heal themselves (or cannot heal themselves) by re-forging relational bonds and thus re-creating a sense of an integrated self. The wounds that I wish to explore, then, are not the physical wounds of war, but the psychic wounds; specifically, the damage that occurs to the intimate self, the disruption of relational bonds that occurs alongside the physical violence of war.

I have chosen to examine healing within the context of colonial and post-colonial wars because of the combined effects of war and colonialism on relational bonds. Colonialism is marked by unhealthy relationality and the effacement of the self. In his introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre notes that:

Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives. The former had the Word, the others had the use of it. Between the two there were hired kinglets, overlords, and a bourgeoisie, sham from beginning to end, which served as go-betweens. In the colonies the truth stood naked, but the citizens of the mother country preferred it with its clothes on; the native had to love them, something in the way mothers are loved.<sup>8</sup> (7)

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<sup>7</sup> "In societies in which the family or community is as or more valued than the person, in which persons achieve meaning in the context of family or community and in which survival depends upon the integration into family or community, such relationality may support the production of what is locally recognized as healthy, responsible and mature persons." (9)

<sup>8</sup> In the original French, this passage reads "Il n'y a pas si longtemps, la terre comptait deux milliards d'habitants, soit cinq cents millions d'hommes et un milliard cinq cents millions d'indigènes. Les premiers disposaient du Verbe, les autres l'empruntaient. Entre ceux-là et ceux-ci, des roitelets vendus, des féodaux, une fausse bourgeoisie forgée toutes pièces servaient d'intermédiaires. Aux colonies la vérité se montrait nue ; les « métropoles » la préféraient vêtue ; il fallait que l'indigène les aimât. Comme des mères en quelque sorte." (17)

The colonial machine creates a stratified society, in which the colonized is less than human and the colonizer is simultaneously deified and maternalized. Between him-/herself and the colonized, the colonizer places an impenetrable barrier of intermediaries. Though the colonized recognize the falseness of this stratification, the colonizer sees fit to ignore their protests; after all, it is the colonizer who possesses the Word—the colonized only has the right to borrow it (“les autres l’*empruntaient*).

Colonial revolutions are a revolt against this unhealthy relationality and an attempt to forge new relational selves free of colonial oppression. Fanon explains in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the “thing” which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.<sup>9</sup> (36-7)

The sexist language of Fanon’s writing is problematic; however, if we replace the word “man/homme” with “self/soi,” this passage elegantly sums up the process of self-creation and self-empowerment that takes place in the process of colonial revolution. Postcolonial wars continue this process of self-formation within the context of burgeoning nationalism.

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<sup>9</sup> “La décolonisation ne passe jamais inaperçue car elle porte sur l’être, elle modifie fondamentalement l’être, elle transforme des spectateurs écrasés d’inessentialité en acteurs privilégiés, saisis de façon quasi grandiose par le faisceau de l’Histoire. Elle introduit dans l’être un rythme propre, apporté par les nouveaux hommes, un nouveau langage, une nouvelle humanité. La décolonisation est véritablement création d’hommes nouveaux. Mais cette création ne reçoit sa légitimité d’aucune puissance surnaturelle : la « chose » colonisée devient homme dans le processus même par lequel elle se libère.” (40)



Finally, I have chosen to focus on women within the context of postcolonial wars because war and nationalism have historically been constructed as belonging primarily to a “male” sphere, with women’s roles being largely ignored or oversimplified. As Sidonie Smith notes in her article, “Belated Narrating: ‘Grandmothers’ Telling Stories of Forced Sexual Servitude during World War II”(2005), women serve as a trope for national honor. She explains: “to the degree that ‘women are seen as the tropes of the collectivity’s honor or shame,’ observes Ronit Lentin, ‘their narratives are all too often officially, or unofficially, silenced’” (124). In times of national crisis, such as war, women’s subjectivity is subsumed by their symbolic function, and as such, their individuality, particularly as regards their victimization, is a threat to nationalism. Moreover, the female body, through its reproductive capacities, serves as a key locus of nation-building. In his book, *Japan’s Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (2002), Yuki Tanaka explains that, during the Second World War, the ideal role for Japanese women was:

to bear and bring up good Japanese children, who would grow up to be loyal subjects of the Emperor...The Japanese wartime government took its lead from Nazi eugenic ideology and policy in these matters. In 1940 the National Eugenic Law was proclaimed. The purposes of the law were to prevent miscegenation and the reproduction of the ‘unfit,’ such as those with mental illness that was believed to be inherited. (32)

During times of national crisis, women’s sexuality may be strictly regulated, and women’s choice in sexual matters severely limited, so as to guarantee the efficient production of loyal subjects to strengthen the threatened nation.

## **Outline of Chapters**

In this dissertation, I will examine, through close readings of literary texts, the ways in which healing through intimate selving is (and is not) manifested in the context of postcolonial warfare. In order to limit the scope of the project, I will be focusing on three wars: the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962), the Indochina Wars (1947-1979) and the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1982). These three wars fall within a relatively short time period (approximately thirty-five years), and they are also linked through the legacy of French colonialism. They also provide an opportunity to examine three very diverse forms of warfare: colonial revolution, civil war, and neo-colonial proxy warfare. I will be focusing on prose narrative (fiction, non-fiction, and auto-fiction) by women writers, and I will also be focusing specifically on female characters in these stories. The reason for this is that, as noted above, war is constructed historically and artistically as a highly gendered phenomenon.

For each text, I will examine the ways in which the authors present the modes of violence (i.e. the relational bonds that are disrupted through warfare, as well as the specific ways in which those bonds are disrupted), as well as modes of healing. That is, I will study the ways in which the violence of war impacts national coherence (does war tear a nation apart, as in a civil war, or does it lead to national unity, as in the idealized case of a colonial revolution?), relationality at the community level (including families, circles of friends, and neighborhoods), as well as the individual's relationship to her own self. I wish to interrogate the degree to which individual women and groups of women function as a microcosm of the nation in these narratives; i.e. I am interested in the similarities and differences between the damage done to the bonds that form a nation and

the damage to the bonds between individuals. I will then investigate the way in which this damage is (or is not) healed: how relational bonds are reconstructed, and what obstacles prevent these bonds from being re-formed. In my analyses of the texts, I will focus on the first four aspects of intimate selving outlined above: intimate selving is not about bounded, autonomous selves; intimate selving is dynamic, reactive, and mutual; intimate selving is a form of embeddedness that encompasses agency; and intimate selving is neither individualist nor collectivist. From these textual analyses, I will draw conclusions regarding the different ways in which women are affected by the violence of war.

I will begin with the Algerian Revolution. The primary literary texts for this chapter will be two novellas from Assia Djébar's collection *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980): "Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement" and "Jour de Ramadhan." *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* is a collection of short stories revolving around women in Algiers in the post-revolution period. Though her characters play varying roles in the revolution and the society that emerged from it, their stories are linked by the common theme of silence. I will examine the ways in which the women break their silence, not through testimony, but through a more intimate sharing of the self; in some cases, I will examine the reasons for women's inability to break their silence. In particular, I will compare the modes of healing through testimony examined by numerous scholars with my own construction of healing through intimate selving.

For the second chapter on the Lebanese Civil War, I will study Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *Hekayat Zahra (The Story of Zahra)* (1980). This novel follows the life of Zahra, a young woman who grows up in pre-civil war Lebanon and comes of age amid the physical and psychological violence of the war. The novel explores the forces that

damaged Zahra's psyche before the war even begins, thus bringing into question the degree to which Zahra's psychic wounds are actually caused by the war. My analysis of this novel will largely be a response to numerous critical works by noted scholar miriam cooke, who argues that the war actually constitutes a form of healing for Zahra because it resolves the conflict between her internal madness and her external reality. I will demonstrate that the war does not constitute a means of healing, but rather a continuation of a lifetime process of toxic selving.

In the third chapter, I will study the Indochina wars through Linda Lê's autofictional novel, *Voix* (1998). Lê's novel revolves around a young Vietnamese woman in France attempting to make sense of her relationship with her deceased father, whom she left behind in Vietnam, all the while negotiating a sense of self as a foreigner living in the land of the former colonizer. Lê's novel is colored by a pervasive sense of isolation and paranoia in a world where all relationships are toxic. In this text, I will examine the relationship between the violence of war and the violence of these toxic relationships. In particular, I will examine the violence of exile and its effects on the process of intimate selving. I will demonstrate that exile is a pernicious form of psychic violence that damages both the narrator's relationships with her family in Vietnam and her relationships with the people she encounters in France. I will identify the means that the narrator attempts to use in order to heal herself, and I will identify the impediments to her completion of the healing process.

Finally, for the conclusion, I will examine the final two aspects of intimate selving: intimate selving as culturally specific, and intimate selving as a necessary means of survival in certain cultural contexts. I will examine the ways in which each character's

intimate selving process can be linked to the cultural context, and I will compare the ways in which the various women's intimate selving processes are manifested. I will identify the aspects of the war that render intimate selving necessary, as well as the aspects that threaten the intimate selving process.

## Chapter 2

### Women of Algiers in Their War

#### Introduction

In an interview with Clarisse Zimra, Algerian author Assia Djébar declares that it is incorrect to refer to the Algerian Revolution as such: “I never use that term; I call it ‘the Algerian war’” (Djébar, *Women of Algiers* 178). The reasons for this choice of terminology are clear, based both on Algerian history and Djébar’s writing. The so-called Algerian Revolution was an imperfect revolution, one that effected only a partial change in Algerian society and resulted in a new form of gendered colonialism. The old structures of French colonialists dominating the Algerian natives was replaced by one in which the men of the newly-liberated Algerian republic dominated Algerian women: as miriam cooke also notes in her article “Arab Women Arab Wars,” “In the absence of a concerted attempt on the women’s part to change their situation or even only to write of war as transforming, Algerian men quickly imposed a neotraditional system that deprived the dreaded ‘new women’ of any voice” (17). This incomplete revolution replaced a society predicated on inequality with a new society where inequality was a tacitly-accepted way of life. The supposedly independent women of postcolonial Algeria became the new colonized, and the ruling male class became the new colonizers. This gendered form of postcolonial colonization is the subject of many literary works by Algerian women, most notably Assia Djébar (born 1936 in Cherchell, Algeria), author of

numerous novels and short stories, director of two films, and member of the *Académie française* as of 2005.

This chapter will consist of an analysis of four female characters from two short works by Djébar: “Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement” (“Women of Algiers in their Apartment”) and “Jour de Ramadhan” (“Day of Ramadan”), both from her 1980 collection *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*. The purpose of this chapter will be to understand the different ways in which the revolution and its aftermath disrupted women’s relational bonds, the obstacles that prevent the characters from healing their wounds (that is, from re-forming the relational bonds that were damaged in the war), and the ways in which three of the four characters are ultimately able to heal their wounds through intimate selving (as defined by Suad Joseph and discussed in the previous chapter). That is, I will examine the characters’ selves in relation to Joseph’s definition of the healthy self as a conception of the individual that “valorize[s] rather than pathologize[s] the embeddedness of self and other” and as “selves in which embeddedness still encompasses agency” (*Intimate Selving*<sup>10</sup> 2). I will examine the ways in which oppressed women discover agency through the exploration of their embedded relations with other women. In this respect, it is important to situate intimate selving as a mode of identity formation. Joseph defines intimate selving as “historically and culturally specific constructs of relationality in the context of intimate relationships in families in the Arab world” (*IS* 2) and as “notions of self and relationality that are gendered because of culturally specific (not universal) notions of gendered child ‘development’ and because of locally specific and changing dynamics of power” (*IS* 2). Intimate selving, then, is not a question of “Eastern” selving versus “Western” selving, nor about

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<sup>10</sup> Hereafter abbreviated as *IS*

“female/feminine” selving versus “male/masculine” selving. Indeed, each individual’s selving process is unique, and it would be simplistic to categorize intimate selving in such terms. However, it can be noted that, as Fanon observes, the process of colonization is one of destruction of the colonized self: “decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind for another” (*Wretched* 1). (If the process of decolonization requires the formation of a new sense of self, it logically follows that the colonized self is the result of the destruction of the pre-colonized self.) In this respect, we can think of the destruction of relational bonds as a weapon of the colonizer, whereas intimate selving serves, albeit not exclusively, as a tool of the formerly colonized.

I have selected “Femmes d’Alger” and “Jour de Ramadhan” in part because they are among Djébar’s more overlooked works; particularly in studies of women and war, scholars have overwhelmingly chosen to study Djébar’s novels *L’Amour, la fantasia* and *La femme sans sépulture*. These two texts are also particularly well-suited to an analysis of intimate selving and healing because the female characters played a variety of different roles during and after the revolution, and as such, both their wounds and their modes of healing vary greatly. An analysis of these two stories will allow us to see the variety of psychic wounds caused by the war, as well as the variety of manners in which women are able to overcome these wounds.

Moreover, in *Femmes d’Alger*, Djébar uses her writing to comment on the visual arts and the writing process as both a form of violence and as a form of relational bonding. She specifically uses her stories to respond to the psychic damage done by Delacroix in their paintings of Algerian women and to reverse the isolation imposed upon the subjects of the paintings by this Orientalist artist. In this chapter, I will therefore



examine the ways in which art—visual and written—both severs and re-forges bonds, and I will interrogate the ways in which Djébar uses her own writing to cope with the violence of war and also the commentaries that she makes on the wounding and healing power of the visual and literary arts. From this examination of Djébar's writing process, I will determine whether it is possible to speak of Djébar's writing process as a form of intimate selving.

This chapter will examine the ways in which the violence of warfare interrupts this process of selving and the ways in which women may heal themselves by re-starting the process. First, because so much of the research conducted on Djébar focuses on her writing process as a form of healing,<sup>11</sup> I will examine the degree to which Djébar's writing process may be considered a form of intimate selving. That is, I will interrogate the degree to which Djébar's writing inserts her into a dynamic network of women in which selves are mutually shaped through sharing of stories and in which the act of connecting to other selves brings agency to all individuals involved. It is this latter part that is most important to this study: my contention is that sharing stories is not an end in and of itself, but rather a means of engaging in intimate selving. My goal here is to examine whether Djébar's writing process enables herself to not merely share stories, but to fully engage with a network of voices and thus engage in intimate selving with other Algerian women. The next step will be to analyze the process of intimate selving in Djébar's characters. Through close readings of the stories of four fictional women (friends Anne and Sarah in "Femmes d'Alger" and sisters Nfissa and Nadja in "Jour de

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Accad, "Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature"; Budig-Markin, "Writing and Filming the Cries of Silence"; Donadey, "African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory"; Gracki, "Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djébar's Algerian Quartet"; Orlando, "Writing new H(er)stories for Francophone Women of Africa and the Caribbean"; Steadman, "A Global Feminist Travels"

Ramadhan”), I will examine the ways in which their isolation manifests itself, the cause of that isolation, the factors that interfere with their process of intimate selving, and in the cases of the three women who are able to engage in intimate selving, I will identify the ways in which they are able to re-start the process of intimate selving and thus heal their war wounds. Finally, I will compare intimate selving with the existing discourse of memory and testimony as healing.

### **Memory vs. Intimate Selving**

I offer intimate selving as an alternative to, and in some ways a refinement of, the various forms of memory and testimony that dominate current scholarship on healing in the wake of the Algerian Revolution. Although the terminology used by critics varies, the current scholarship on warfare and healing is dominated by a discourse of anamnesis and collective memory. The process of anamnesis, sometimes referred to as re-writing history, unforgetting, or re-memory, is often proposed as a means for healing the wounds caused by amnesia. In her chapter “The Algerian War Revisited,” Susan Ireland refers to a “productive form of collective remembering, an anamnesis” that allows individuals and societies to overcome the amnesia that prevents them from defining themselves (204). Although Ireland refers to individuals throughout her article, her primary concern is the healing of the national self, and the individual is not truly a concern in her argument. Similarly, Katherine Gracki, in her article “Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djébar’s Algerian Quartet,” argues that Djébar’s Algerian quartet, particularly *L’Amour, la fantasia*, “represents...the rewriting of Algerian history from a feminine stance so that these screams [of refusal] will be heard and so that a collective oral history

transmitted by women may also be inscribed into the fabric of Algeria's past" (836).

While Gracki speaks of individual women as examples, they primarily serve as avatars of the collective; each woman's story (and each woman's wounds) represents the totality of women's sacrifices during the war. Moreover, the mode of healing that Gracki describes revolves around the embeddedness of the individual self in the collective self, rather than the embeddedness of individual selves. Anne Donadey makes a similar argument to Ireland and Gracki, though she frames it differently. In her article "African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Assia Djébar's *La femme sans sépulture*," she argues that "postcolonial writers feel the necessity of rewriting the past because the dominant versions of history have left blanks, gaps, and misrepresentations" (66), and she specifically defines Djébar's project as one motivated by "the need to resist historical amnesia and to speak the unspeakable" (67). Donadey's reading of Djébar's project does relate to selving in that it recognizes the misrepresentation of colonized selves in the histories written by the colonizing powers; however, Donadey does not acknowledge intimate selving; she is concerned more with a collective national self than with individual selves.<sup>12</sup> It is not my goal to debunk these critics' views—indeed, I consider them a valid understanding of post-war healing—but I do argue that the form of selving that they describe is only one of many parts of the healing process. While the above-cited critics are more concerned with healing the collective self, I am concerned with the healing of the individual self within a context of

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<sup>12</sup> In her introduction, Donadey explains: "I focus on two authors who use fiction to reconstruct women's experiences during historical events that were central to the construction of their respective nations' identities... This article demonstrates clear similarities of concern between Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Assia Djébar's *La femme sans sépulture*, especially with respect to the question of the contemporary legacy of traumatic national pasts and the treatment of women's agency and desire under situations of extreme violence" (66).

relationality as defined by Suad Joseph. That is, the relationships that I am examining are those that Joseph describes as “neither individualist nor corporatist, but relational,” in which selves are “embedded in relational matrices that shape their sense of self but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency” (IS 11). The relationships that I am examining are ones in which neither the individual nor the collective is privileged and in which the individual self is not subsumed by the collective self. Moreover, the criticism dealing with Djébar and healing deals overwhelmingly with the writerly project as a form of healing without addressing the healing process of the characters. Although I will address Djébar’s writing as a means of healing, my primary concern is with the healing processes of the characters in Djébar’s stories.

One critic who does deal with anamnesis at both the individual and collective levels is Dominique D. Fisher, who describes it in her book *Ecrire l’urgence* as “une entreprise libératrice qui arrache au silence, l’écriture, la mémoire individuelle et la mémoire collective” (76).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Fisher acknowledges the importance of the act of sharing the individual self. In her discussion of Djébar’s writerly project, she notes that “[i]l ne s’agit pas seulement de trouver une voix pour dire ‘je’ et de donner une voix aux exclus de l’Histoire, mais de se placer avant tout à leur écoute. En effet, la mise en voix des tabous et des silences de l’Histoire ne peut avoir lieu sans la rencontre d’une écoute, d’un espace de réception” (32).<sup>14</sup> Unlike the aforementioned critics, Fisher acknowledges the need for interaction in the healing process; simple testimony is useless if there is

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<sup>13</sup> “a liberating enterprise that breaks the silence of writing, individual memory, and collective memory” [All translations from this work are my own.]

<sup>14</sup> “it is not only a question of finding a voice to say ‘I’ and of giving a voice to those excluded by History, but above all it is a question of placing oneself as listener. In effect, the voicing of the taboos and the silences of History cannot take place without a listener, a space of reception.”

nobody to hear it and to respond to it. However, the process that Fisher describes is not necessarily a mutual process of sharing; unless the listener and speaker share both roles, then the process is not truly one of intimate selving. Similarly, in her article “Edward Said and Assia Djébar: A Contrapuntal Reading,” Mildred Mortimer describes the way in which Djébar inserts herself into the collective memory of Algerian women:

“Discovering the *enfumade* (asphyxiation of Algerian tribes in caves) of 1845, she describes the violent and macabre incident with subjectivity and emotion, affirming her ties to the victims; they are her ancestors, their agony is hers” (63). Again, there is a sense of Djébar’s embeddedness in the Other, but this embeddedness is one-sided; Djébar’s spiritual ancestors are not able to engage in intimate selving with her as she does with them. I am concerned with a mutual embeddedness of the self and Other (as represented in the interactions amongst the characters, rather than between the writer and the reader), a form of living and vibrant dialogue of selves. For Joseph, the process of intimate selving must be dynamic, reactive, and mutual; she defines the process of intimate selving as a process of “selves woven through intimate relationships that are lifelong, which transform over the course of personal and social history and which shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self” (*IS* 2). A passive listener is not sufficient for intimate selving to take place; in order for intimate selving to take place, the listener must be changed by the process of listening, and the listener must also effect a change in the speaker, either through mutual sharing or feedback. Moreover, as with the previous critics, Fisher and Mortimer are concerned with writing as healing, and they devote little attention to the characters in Djébar’s works, whereas I intend to make the characters the primary focus of my study.

It is important to note that critics do not offer memory as an unproblematic panacea; it is not a one-size-fits-all solution for historical trauma. In fact, Donadey warns of the dangers of some forms of memory. In her discussion of Zoulikha, the titular character of *La femme sans sepulture*, Donadey remarks that “[t]here are two modes of speaking about the past...and one of them paradoxically silences it further...Djebar is criticizing the way in which official commemoration served to fix a memory into a rigid interpretation of the past” (“Postcolonial Memory” 69). In this “official, commemorative approach,” intimate selving is not possible because one party in the equation is static. In order for intimate selving to take place, both parties must be able to adapt and to have an impact on the other’s sense of self. The preferred mode of memory for Donadey and Djebar is one “that opens a space for the expression of emotions connected to the past... and therefore keeps Zoulikha’s memory alive by allowing those who loved her to convey the ways she is still alive for them” (69). Although Zoulikha herself is dead, it is important to keep her memory alive so that it remains dynamic. This form of memory cannot truly be considered intimate selving, as it is not a mutual process; Zoulikha is dead at the time of the writing of the novel, so it is impossible for her to truly “shape and [be] shaped by shifts and changes of the self,” as Joseph argues (*IS* 2). However, the importance of a dynamic self is central to Joseph’s definition of intimate selving, which posits connectivity as “‘an activity or an intention’ [in Catherine Keller’s words] rather than a state of being” (12). Although Zoulikha’s self cannot be shaped by others after her death, her memory can be, and in this respect, Donadey’s ideal form of memory is similar to intimate selving.

The mode of selving that takes place in “Femmes d’Alger” and “Jour de Ramadhan” is somewhat less complicated, as all of the characters are still alive; however, the necessity of a mutual and dynamic process of selving is nonetheless central to my argument. Healing, as I define it, takes place through a process that Suad Joseph describes as “selves woven through intimate relationships that are lifelong, which transform over the course of personal and social history and which shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self” (*IS* 2). A healthy self is one that both acts upon and is acted upon by other selves, a self that is a constant state of evolution as it interacts with other selves. Moreover, intimate selving privileges neither the individual nor the collective, but rather the *act* of relationality. As Joseph notes, intimate selving is “a construct that is neither individualist nor corporatist, but relational,” one that views individuals as “embedded in relational matrices that shape their sense of self but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency” (11). This mode of selving differs from the dominant theories of memory in that intimate selving does not privilege the collective over the self, and the individual does not merely serve the needs of the collective. Rather, the individual is a distinct, but embedded, member of a network of selves in which “a person’s boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others” (*IS* 12). Intimate selving is not a question of a collective self, but rather of the act of connecting selves.

### **Women and the Algerian Revolution**

In order to understand post-revolutionary women’s writing, we must first understand the situation of Algerian women before, during, and after the revolution, particularly in terms of their role in society and of the violence directed towards them.

Because the violence of the revolution was a direct response to colonial violence, we must first examine the situation of women in colonial Algeria. Although the physical violence of colonialism is important and devastating, this study is primarily concerned with the psychic violence that is a necessary part of the colonial project. Colonization depends not only upon the destruction of colonized bodies, but also of the colonized self. Albert Memmi explains in a section of *Portrait du colonisé* entitled “La déshumanisation” that colonization “consiste d’abord en une série de négations. Le colonisé *n’est pas ceci, n’est pas cela*. Jamais il n’est considéré positivement; ou s’il l’est, la qualité concédée relève d’un *manque* psychologique ou éthique” [author’s italics] (103).<sup>15</sup> By defining the colonized through a series of negatives, the colonizer negates the colonized him/herself. The colonizer does not merely say, “The colonized is not what I am;” the colonizer declares that “the colonized *is not*.” Thus does the colonizer kill the colonized, not with guns or knives, but with philosophy. This act of negation continues after the revolution, but in this case it is women, not all Algerians, who are negated. By denying Algerian women equal citizenship in the supposedly decolonized nation, the male ruling class is not only denying Algerian women equality; it is denying Algerian women’s personhood. Indeed, this violence may not only be a tool of colonialism, but also an end goal. For Joshua Cole, this is indeed the case. He notes in his article, “Intimate Acts and Unspeakable Relations” that “violence in the colonial situation should not always be seen as simply the unfortunate cost of an otherwise more or less defensible goal—sometimes, at least, it is the goal itself” [author’s italics] (131). If we extrapolate this argument to the post-revolutionary context, we can understand that the inequality of

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<sup>15</sup> “consists, in the first place, of a series of negations. The colonized *is not* this, *is not* that. He is never considered in a positive light; or if he is, the quality which is conceded is the result of a psychological or ethical *failing*.” (83-84) [Greenfeld’s translation with Memmi’s italics added.]



the sexes is not an accident, but rather a fully-integrated and intentional aspect of the postcolonial government and society. The relegation of women to second-class citizenship is a deliberate act and an essential aspect of post-revolutionary Algerian politics: by creating an underclass composed of Algerian women, the male ruling elite place themselves in a position of power.

The reason for this deliberate marginalization of women is that women's rights are seen by the male ruling class as antithetical to the newly-formed Algerian identity. Valentine M Moghadam observes in her introduction to *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies* that “[f]ar from being an automatic concomitant of national liberation, women's liberation has been frequently regarded as inimical to the integrity and identity of the national group” (2). The male ruling class conceives of Algerian identity as masculine, and there is no room in that definition for a liberated female class. Under this gendered definition of Algerianness, it is impossible for a woman to identify as truly Algerian. Just as the colonized Algerians were defined in terms of what they were not, the supposedly “free” Algerian women are defined in terms of absence or lack: they *are not* full citizens, and they *do not* have political power. Given that they are defined in terms of absence and not presence, post-revolutionary Algerian women have no basis upon which to build a sense of self. Suad Joseph explains the mechanisms behind the creation of such a class of disenfranchised citizens in her book *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*:

Citizenship is not only a legal process but also what Aihwa Ong...has called a “cultural process of subjectification,” of subject-making... Classical political thinkers usually have discussed the citizen in terms of an abstract personhood—the citizen as an “individual” with undifferentiated, uniform, and universal properties, entitlements, and duties. Through such homogenizing abstractions, prominent scholars

theorizing citizenship...appear to have rendered the citizen neutral in gender and/or cultural terms and in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. (3-4)

If the process of citizenship is intimately linked to the process of subjectification, then to exclude women from not only citizenship, but the process of citizenship, is to interfere with their creation of a sense of self. If a woman is to be considered a full citizen, then she must deny her sex as a defining characteristic of her self, for sexual differentiation goes against the “gender neutrality” that forms the basis of citizenship. If, on the other hand, she insists on maintaining her uniqueness as a woman, then she cannot enjoy the status of full citizenship, for she threatens national homogeneity. Here we see the ways in which intimate selving becomes problematic in post-revolutionary Algeria. For women, the process of selving becomes disrupted because, despite their role in the formation of the independent Algerian state, they are not able to create bonds to other people *as Algerian citizens*. Their status as citizens of the independent state is compromised by their unequal status, thus depriving them of a potential link for interpersonal bonding, particularly with men, who are full citizens of the state. However, there is the potential for women to bond with other women specifically because they share the burden of incomplete citizenship; they can unite against the patriarchal structure of the new Algerian state much as the colonized Algerians—men and women—united against the French colonial power structures.

### **Writing as Intimate Selving?**

Although relationality among female characters is a common theme in Assia Djebar’s works, particularly her 1980 short story collection *Femmes d’Alger dans leur*

*appartement*, for many critics, it is the act of writing itself (in particular the writing of *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *La femme sans sépulture*) that constitutes a form of healing through selving. Indeed, for Evelyn Accad, one of the main functions of contemporary Arab women's writing in general is the formation of self. She argues that "in the face of legalized oppression and social degradation, it is not too surprising that the first concern of women novelists has been their female characters' private struggles for a personal identity, seen alternately as a search for personhood or an escape from 'thinghood'" (801). Though she concerns herself here primarily with women novelists' characters and their search for self, Accad recognizes that Arab women writers themselves constitute "a self-empowering, inward look at problems and the search for the self" (801). Though Accad speaks not of intimate selving, but rather of rebellion against societal structures that prevent women from realizing their full potential, it is notable that she frames her argument in terms of selving. For Accad, the act of creating characters who escape from the objectification imposed upon them by an oppressive society is in and of itself a quest for selfhood for Arab women writers, and by extension, for Arab women in general. For Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman, the act of writing-as-selving is more interactive than the process that Accad describes. She contends that:

[Djebar's] journeys to collect and represent women's voices allow them to be heard and to become shapers of discourse and agents of social and political change. The result is a dynamic exchange as Djebar does not position herself as merely translator or scribe for other, silenced women, but illustrates the process whereby their stories inform her own search for voice and self. (174-5)

Indeed, Steadman has described Djebar's project as one of intimate selving. The self that Djebar is searching for is one that is not bounded and autonomous, but rather is a "form of embeddedness that encompasses agency", it is a mutual sharing of selves in which

Djebar and the women whom she interviews simultaneously “shape and are shaped” by each other, and the act of selving neither individualist nor collectivist (*IS* 2).

This raises an important question: can we describe the act of writing *Women of Algiers* as a form of healing through intimate selving? In order to answer this question, we must first examine the forms of violence to which it is a response; did Djebar write these stories in order to address the rupture of relational bonds? If so, does she, through the act of telling these stories, engage in a process of intimate selving with other victims of that same violence, and how does she do so? I will address these questions by examining Djebar’s own conception of the project of *Femmes d’Alger* as described in her preface and post-face to the collection.

Although the violence that she addresses in the stories themselves is primarily related to the Algerian Revolution, this collection is not only about the violence of war, but rather about the violence that men have perpetrated against women—and in particular Western men against Arab women—for centuries. In the post-face to her book, “Regard interdit, son coupé,” she describes the violence directed against Algerian women beginning with French artist Eugène Delacroix’s two paintings from which Djebar draws the title of the collection. Although the first version, painted in 1834 is the more well-known of the two, Djebar’s analysis of the 1849 version reveals much more about the violence of the painting. The shift in angle in the second version of the painting has three effects for Djebar:

[d]’éloigner de nous les trois femmes qui s’enfoncent alors plus profondément dans leur retrait, de découvrir et dénuder entièrement un des murs de la chambre, de le faire peser d’un plus grand poids sur la solitude de ces femmes, enfin d’accentuer le caractère irréel de la lumière...

Femmes en attente toujours. Moins sultanes soudain que prisonnières. N’entretenant avec nous, spectateurs, aucun rapport. Ne

s'abandonnant ni ne se refusant au regard. Etrangères mais présentes  
terriblement dans cette atmosphère raréfiée de la claustration. (148-49)<sup>16</sup>

Delacroix has colonized this apartment and its inhabitants. By introducing us as spectators to the private space of these women, Delacroix is not enabling us to relate to them; on the contrary, he prevents us from doing so. The composition of the painting emphasizes the women's isolation and silence. By entering the women's physical space, he has imprisoned them in their psychic space and denied them access to intimate selving. Indeed, Djébar argues that they are not able to engage in any form of selving, intimate or otherwise: "Elles demeurent absentes à elles-même, à leur corps, à leur sensualité, à leur bonheur" (150).<sup>17</sup> Because they cannot engage in intimate selving, the women are ultimately unable to relate even to themselves. They are isolated from others, from each other, and from their own sense of selfhood, of sensuality, and of happiness. Delacroix has not attacked these women physically, but rather psychically; he has attacked their very being. The violence that Djébar addresses in this collection, then, is not merely the violence of objectification of women; it is indeed a form of violence directed at the process of intimate selving.

However, it is somewhat more problematic to characterize Djébar's writing process itself as intimate selving. Though she does frame her writing as a project of engaging women's voices and inserting them into a network that imbues women with agency, it is unclear if the project takes into account the historic and cultural specificity

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<sup>16</sup> [T]o make the three women, who now penetrate more deeply into their retreat, more distant from us; to uncover and entirely bare one of the room's walls, having it weigh down more heavily on the solitude of these women; and finally to accentuate the unreal quality of the light...

Women always waiting. Suddenly less sultanas than prisoners. They have no relationship with us, the spectators. They neither abandon nor refuse themselves to our gaze. Foreign but terribly present in this rarified atmosphere of confinement. (136) [All translations of this text come from Marjolijn de Jager.]

<sup>17</sup> They remain absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness. (137)

of the women's stories. Djebbar explains in the "Ouverture" to her collection that the stories contained therein are an attempt to break the silence imposed on women throughout the ages:

Ces nouvelles, quelques repères sur un trajet d'écoute, de 1958 à 1978.

Conversations fragmentées, remémorées, reconstituées... Récits fictifs, visages et murmures d'un imaginaire proche, d'un passé-présent se cabrant sous l'intrusion d'un nouveau informel.

Je pourrais dire « nouvelles traduites de... », mais de quelle langue ? De l'arabe ? D'un arabe populaire, ou d'un arabe féminin ; autant dire d'un arabe souterrain.

J'aurais pu écouter ces voix dans n'importe quelle langue non écrite, non enregistrée, transmise seulement par chaînes d'échos et de soupirs.

Son arabe, iranien, afghan, berbère ou bengali, pourquoi pas, mais toujours avec timbre féminin et lèvres proférant sous le masque...<sup>18</sup> (7)

It is clear that Djebbar's project is one of achieving agency through a *prise de parole*, not only for herself, but for a network of previously silenced or ignored voices. In this respect, Djebbar's project fits Joseph's definition of a self whose agency is "situated, contextual, and relational" (*IS* 15) and in which "embeddedness still encompasses agency" (2). Moreover, the selves that Djebbar describes are ones in which "relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others" (*IS* 12); Djebbar speaks of intertwining voices that indicate embeddedness of self and other. However, the universality of these voices appears to be problematic; Joseph specifies that intimate selving is "about notions of self and relationality that are gendered because of culturally specific (not universal) notions of gendered child 'development' and because of locally

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<sup>18</sup> These stories, a few frames of reference on a journey of listening, from 1958 to 1978.

Fragmented, remembered, reconstituted conversations... Fictitious accounts, faces, and murmurings of a nearby imaginary, of a past-present that rebels against the intrusion of a new abstraction.

I could say: "stories translated from..." but from which language? From the Arabic? From colloquial Arabic or from feminine Arabic; one might as well call it underground Arabic.

I could have listened to those voices in no matter what language, nonwritten, nonrecorded, transmitted only by chains of echoes and sighs.

Arabic sounds—Iranian, Afghan, Berber, or Bengali—and why not, but always in feminine tones, uttered from lips beneath a mask... (1)

specific and changing dynamics of power” (*IS* 2). However, Djebbar refers to a “feminine Arabic,” which she later equates with feminine tones of Iranian, Afghan, Berber, and Bengali voices, thus suggesting that there is a sort of essential subjugated feminine voice that crosses national and linguistic boundaries. In formulating such a monolithic feminine voice, Djebbar also goes against Joseph’s requirement that intimate selving be “neither individualist nor collective” (*IS* 11). Djebbar is allowing individual voices to be subsumed by a collective female voice. However, she later contradicts this sense of uniformity when she exhorts her reader: “Ne pas prétendre ‘parler pour’, ou pis ‘parler sur’, à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre: première des solidarités à assumer pour les quelques femmes arabes qui obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de mouvement, du corps et de l’esprit” (8).<sup>19</sup> Here Djebbar emphasizes the importance of the individual voice and the impossibility of speaking for another. This contradiction actually fits in well with Joseph’s notion of intimate selving, as Joseph does not see individualist and collectivist forms of selving as contradictory, but rather as viable alternatives that may exist side by side: intimate selving is a process of “relational selfhood that exist[s] side by side with individualist and other notions of self in the same society and even within the same person” (*IS* 2). Indeed, Djebbar speaks of “solidarity” while at the same time underlining the importance of the individual voice; in this respect, Djebbar’s conception of the community of women is indeed relational rather than individualist or collective; each individual voice contributes to the collective without being subsumed by the whole. The form of connectivity described here is indeed one that “necessitates neither inequality in

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<sup>19</sup> Don’t claim to “speak for” or, worse, to “speak on,” barely speaking next to, and if possible *very close to*: these are the first of the solidarities to be taken on by the few Arabic women who obtain or acquire freedom of movement, of body and of mind. (2)

general (hierarchy) nor the subordination of women and juniors in particular (patriarchy)” (IS 12).

The final requirement for Djébar’s writing process to constitute a form of intimate selving is that it result in a mutual development of the self, a process in which individuals “shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self” (IS 2). In most of her preface, Djébar speaks in the third person, thus suggesting that she does not see herself as sharing a connection with the women about whom she writes. However, near the end of the preface, Djébar explicitly joins herself with a network of women. She asks: “Femmes d’Alger nouvelles, qui depuis ces dernières années, circulent, qui pour franchir le seuil s’aveuglent une seconde de soleil, se délivrent-elles—*nous délivrons-nous*—tout à fait du rapport d’ombre entretenu des siècles durant avec leur propre corps?”<sup>20</sup> [emphasis added] (8). Djébar corrects herself when she refers to the new women of Algiers in the third person—“do they free themselves” becomes “*do we free ourselves*”—for she realizes that she is indeed one of them. More importantly, she proposes the speech-act (which she discusses as an act of “unveiling”) as a means of collective liberation; that is, one woman’s liberating *prise de parole* has a liberating effect for other women, and thus shapes other selves.

In many ways, then, Djébar’s authorial project does constitute a form of intimate selving: the project revolves around a form of selving in which the self is not “bounded, separate, or autonomous” (IS 12), but rather embedded with other selves in such a way that “embeddedness still encompasses agency” (IS 2), the process of selving is “neither

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<sup>20</sup> New women of Algiers, who have been allowed to move about in the streets just these last few years, have been momentarily blinded by the sun as they cross the threshold, do they free themselves—*do we free ourselves*—altogether from the relationship with their own bodies, a relationship lived in the shadows until now, as they have done throughout the centuries? (2)



individualist nor corporatist” (*IS* 11), and there is a mutual, dynamic sharing of selves “which shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self” (*IS* 2).

### **Healing through Intimate Selving in “Women of Algiers”**

The criticism of *Women of Algiers* largely focuses on Djébar’s authorial project, and the few critics who do treat the characters’ healing processes focus on the same topics as other critics: that is, the act of inserting women’s voices into the narrative of warfare. For Katherine Gracki, this inscription occurs in part through the scars inscribed on women’s bodies; Sarah, the protagonist of the title story, bears a scar, which “bears witness to the torture she endured in the colonizer’s prison and inscribes women into the Algerian struggle for liberation” (836). It is not my goal to disprove Gracki’s argument; rather, I propose that there is another form of inscription taking place at the same time as the inscription of women’s voices into a national narrative. I argue that women may also heal themselves by inscribing themselves into each other’s stories through the act of intimate selving. That is, women share themselves in such a way as to “coshape their desires, interests, ambitions, and behavior” in a relationship in which each woman “[b]oth shaped and shaping,... is neither individualist nor collectivist, but absorbing and actively defining self and other, each of which shifts as the actor acts” (*IS* 15). The act of sharing one’s story is only a part of the healing process; in order for healing to take place, the sharing of stories must result in a transformation of both the speaker and the listener.

In order to understand the healing process that takes place in the story, I will follow the stories of two female characters. I will first examine, through close reading of the narrative, the ways in which their wounds manifest themselves through their sense of

isolation and disconnectedness. I will then demonstrate the ways in which their different experiences of the war caused this destruction of relational bonds and the post-war obstacles that prevented the resumption of the process of intimate selving. Finally, I will define the means by which each woman is able to overcome those obstacles and engage in intimate selving.

Though the title story of Djébar's collection includes four major female characters, I will focus on the two primary characters: Anne, a French woman who grew up in Algeria during the revolution and left after independence, and Sarah, an Algerian woman who has remained in the country. Sarah has married Ali, a surgeon, and she has a son, but she feels no connection to her family, and she feels that she has little voice outside of the institute of musicology where she works as a specialist in Algerian women's folk music. Anne, like Sarah, is married with children, but she confesses that she does not even feel as if she is a part of her own family. At the beginning of the story, Anne is in the bathroom of her apartment in Algiers, having intentionally overdosed on pills. Sarah rescues her, and the following day, Anne goes to the public bath with some of the local women, where she is eventually joined by Sarah. The conversation that Anne has with the women, combined with an incident involving an injured masseuse/water carrier helps both Anne and Sarah to overcome their silence. Anne and Sarah have a transformative conversation in which they finally voice their pain and thus to see themselves and each other not as women suffering in isolation, but as members of a community of women with shared pain and shared hopes.<sup>21</sup> Healing for these women

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<sup>21</sup> Anne acknowledges herself as part of a "chain of women" (48), while Sarah finds healing through "the Woman as look and the Woman as voice" (50).

comes not in the form of public testimony, but rather through a private sharing of the self, a sharing that results in a new understanding of the self.

### Anne

Anne's wounds manifest themselves in a much more dramatic way than Sarah's. Indeed, Sarah recognizes Anne's isolation even over the telephone. When Sarah picks up the phone, she hears Anne's voice: "C'est moi! commence Anne. Peux-tu venir? Je ne suis pas bien... (suspens; Sarah appelle, chuchotant)... Pas bien du tout, reprend au loin la voix isolée"<sup>22</sup> (13). Not only is Anne's voice isolated; it is also distant, thus emphasizing Anne's solitude and separation from others. Upon her arrival at Anne's apartment, Sarah discovers that Anne has been shut up inside for two days: "La voiture arrêtée, Sarah ouvre la porte d'un couloir tapissé de mosaïques. Depuis deux jours, Anne se cloître dans cette vieille demeure"<sup>23</sup> (13). Once Anne has thrown up the pills that she has swallowed, she confesses to Sarah, "Sarah, je suis venue ici pour mourir!"<sup>24</sup> (14), and she goes on to explain why she has come to Algiers to die:

—Je l'ai compris à l'aube, hier, en sortant sur le pont: le bateau approchait. Tout le monde regardait la ville blanche, ses arcades, comme plongées dans l'eau, ses terrasses penchées. Moi, devant le spectacle attendu, je pleurais sans même m'en apercevoir et quand je m'en suis rendu compte, alors seulement ces mots, malgré l'éclat du dehors : « Mon Dieu, je suis venue là pour mourir ! » Cette évidence m'apparut : cette ville où, paraît-il, je suis née, que j'avais oubliée, même quand les journaux hier en parlaient tant, j'y reviens pour la fin...

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<sup>22</sup> "It's me!" Anne begins. "Can you come over? I'm not well..." (suspense; Sarah calls, whispering)... "Not well at all," the detached voice in the distance begins again." (6)

<sup>23</sup> The car parked, Sarah opens the door of a hallway covered with mosaic tile. For two days, Anne has been cloistered inside this old building. (7)

<sup>24</sup> "Sarah, I've come here to die!" (8)

Anne débite ensuite une histoire chronologique, en ordre. « Son »  
histoire ; le mari, les trois enfants, quinze années d'une vie étrangère  
contenue dans une heure de mots : est-ce banal ? C'est banal.<sup>25</sup> (14-15)

Anne's story teems with images of isolation and disconnectedness. She is disconnected not only from others, but even from herself: she does not notice herself crying, she has completely forgotten the city where she was born, and even her own life story is not her own—the possessive pronoun is qualified through the use of quotation marks. The details that Anne gives of her life—a husband and children—should suggest a degree of intimate selving, given that they are presented under the heading of Anne's story. That is, Anne is presented as having an identity that is intimately linked to other people, and identity that is based not on a sense of an autonomous self, but rather on a self that draws on relationships with loved ones. However, there is no real connection between Anne and her family. She considers her life “foreign,” and it is clear that the word refers not only to the fact that her life is physically removed from Algeria; it is also removed from Anne herself. In the end, only one conclusion can be drawn about Anne's story: it is indeed banal, devoid of real meaning. Anne is thus wounded on two levels by Joseph's standards: if the healthy self is one in which “embeddedness encompasses agency” (*IS* 2), then Anne has been simultaneously stripped of her embeddedness and her agency.

Although Anne never explicitly reveals the cause of her wounds, it is evident from her conversation with Sarah that her exile plays a large role in her alienation. The

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<sup>25</sup> “I understood it yesterday at dawn, as I came out on the deck: the boat was coming in to shore. Everyone was looking at the white city, its arcades almost diving into the water, its leaning terraces. Facing this long-awaited scene, I was crying without even knowing it, and when I did realize it, the only words that came to me—despite the splendor out there—were: ‘My God, I’ve come here to die!’ It all seemed so obvious to me: this city where I apparently was born, which I had forgotten, even when yesterday’s newspapers were talking about it all the time, I came back here for the end...”

Then Anne chronologically pours out a story, a predictable one. “Her” story; the husband, the three children, fifteen years of a strange life contained in one hour of words: Is it trite? It’s trite. (8) [The word “étranger” corresponds more to the English word “foreign,” rather than “strange,” as the translator chose to translate it here.]

disconnect between herself and her natal city closely matches Edward Said's description of exile in his essay "Reflections on Exile": "Exile... is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (137). Though I disagree with Said's contention that exile is an unhealable wound, it is clear from Anne's words that she is suffering due to her separation from Algiers. Though she, as a *pied-noir*, is nominally French, she considers her life in France, and the people associated with that life, foreign to her. Her exile from Algeria has left her with "the mutilated memory of a 'passé troué' (a past with holes," and it is "virtually impossible to 'turn the page' of history, for it had been effectively ripped out of the book" (Gross 217). Anne has lost her connections to her past, and she cannot move on because the people who enter her life in France cannot access that past and thus access an understanding of Anne herself. Because her husband and children are not from her natal city of Algiers, she finds herself unable to engage in intimate selfing with them. There is no sense of embeddedness between Anne and her family; her conclusion that her life is banal clearly indicates that her family does not shape Anne's self.

If we accept the proposition that Anne is able to heal herself, then it is evident that her wound is related not only to geography, but also to the loss of "the nourishment of tradition [and] family" (Said 138). Merely returning to Algiers was insufficient to heal Anne, for her first impulse upon returning is to attempt to kill herself. At this point, she is still suffering from "the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation and community" (Said 146). In order for her to begin healing, she must first acknowledge her place within a network of individuals. This healing

process begins when she leaves one *hammam*<sup>26</sup>—the bathroom of her apartment, a place of death infused with the stench of vomit—to another, the public bathhouse. Unlike Delacroix’s harem or Ingres’ *Bain turc* (1862), this *hammam* has not been co-opted by the Western male gaze; indeed, it is an exceptional space of freedom for the women of Algiers. When Anne inquires about a singing woman in the bathhouse, Baya replies, “Elle se console plutôt!... Nombre de femmes ne peuvent sortir que pour le bain”<sup>27</sup> (38). For this unnamed woman, the *hammam* is a place where she can heal the psychic wounds caused by her solitude. Likewise, Anne begins the process of healing through intimate selving. The process is not immediate, nor is it an easy one: the intimacy of nudity and physical contact causes her discomfort. An old woman notices this discomfort shortly after Anne enters the bathhouse: “A sa manière de s’asseoir sur le tabouret trop bas et d’être encombrée de sa nudité, la vieille la sentit étrangère, malgré ses cheveux noirs et surtout son sourire un peu las qui la faisait ressembler à cause de sa résignation, à une femme de la ville”<sup>28</sup> (39). Though the old woman feels a sort of connection to Anne because of her evident resignation, a trait common to the local women, the connection is incomplete due to Anne’s discomfort; her nudity is too much to bear, and she is unwilling to share so much of herself with strangers. This discomfort is exacerbated later: “Anne fit elle-même sa tresse, sourit d’un air gauche, gênée de sa poitrine nue qu’un enfant, juché

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<sup>26</sup> The Arabic word حمام (*hammam*) refers both to a private bathroom in a house and to a public bathhouse.

<sup>27</sup> “It’s more that she’s consoling herself... Many women can only go out to the baths.” (30)

<sup>28</sup> By the manner in which she sat on the stool that was too low for her and the way in which her nudity burdened her, the old woman sensed that she was a foreigner, despite her black hair and particularly her somewhat weary smile, her resignation, which made her look like a woman of this city. (31)

sur les bras d'une voisine, s'était mis soudain à caresser"<sup>29</sup> (41). Though this gesture, which puts Anne in an almost maternal position relative to the child, makes her uncomfortable, Anne is the grateful recipient of maternal gestures from other women. Shortly after their arrival in the bathhouse, "Baya...se mit à verser maternellement de l'eau tiède sur la chevelure d'Anne qui, en se déployant, lui recouvrait tout le dos"<sup>30</sup> (37). Later, the masseuse covers Anne and Sarah "maternellement toutes deux « comme de jeunes mariées », précisa-t-elle heureuse de la complicité que ce cliché ne manquait pas de provoquer"<sup>31</sup> (44). Anne clearly begins to recognize the relational bonds between herself and the women around her, for when she accompanies the masseuse to the hospital shortly afterwards, she finds herself drawn to the old woman, thinking to herself, "Si je pouvais lui avouer que je me sens renouée à elle!...J'ai dû avoir une nourrice comme elle..."<sup>32</sup> (45) [Djebar's ellipses]. It is unclear whether Anne's connection to the masseuse is due to the old woman's maternal treatment or to sympathy (or perhaps empathy) for the woman's rude treatment at the hands of the doctor—Anne's reflection comes immediately after a confrontation between the masseuse and Ali, Sarah's surgeon husband, who mocked the woman for refusing general anesthesia for religious reasons. Regardless, Anne seems to view the old woman not merely as another face in the crowd, but as a fellow woman struggling against the male hegemony in a society that undervalues its women. As a result, Anne overcomes her discomfort at sharing herself

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<sup>29</sup> Anne braided her own hair, smiled with embarrassment when a child, perched in the arms of a woman next to her, suddenly began to caress her naked chest. (33)

<sup>30</sup> Baya... began in a motherly fashion to pour tepid water over Anne's hair, which, as it fanned out, covered her entire back. (29)

<sup>31</sup> Maternally... "like two young brides," as she put it, happy with the complicity this cliché never failed to provoke... (35)

<sup>32</sup> "If only I could tell her that I feel a bond with her... I must have had a wet nurse like that..." (36)

and begins to see the value of “social systems that value linkage, bonding, and sociability” (*IS* 9). However, she is not yet able to engage in the process of mutual sharing of selves that constitutes intimate selving.

Her process of intimate selving does not begin until Sarah initiates it. After Sarah shares the story of her torture and imprisonment during the revolution, Anne recognizes not only the pervasive oppression of women, but also the bonds that link them: “Anne se mit à penser: dans cette ville étrange, ivre de soleil mais des prisons cernant haut chaque rue, chaque femme vit-elle pour son propre compte, ou d’abord pour la chaîne des femmes autrefois enfermées, génération après génération, tandis que déversait la même lumière, un bleu immuable, rarement terni ?”<sup>33</sup> (58). It is at this point that Anne consciously acknowledges this “chain” for the first time, and it is this revelation that changes her path. This is the moment when Anne fully comprehends that “[t]he agency of the self is situated, contextual, and relational” and that individuals are “embedded in webs of relationships that co-shape their desires, interests, ambitions, and behavior” (*IS* 15). By placing herself within this chain of women, Anne overcomes the “narcissistic masochism” that Said describes (146), and she replaces her desire for death with a drive to live, not only for herself, but for those to whom she is connected. As she waits for her plane to take her back to France the following day, Anne announces to Sarah: “Je ne pars pas!...Je ne pars plus!...Un jour, nous prendrons ensemble le bateau!...Non pour partir, non, pour contempler la ville quand s’ouvriront toutes les portes”<sup>34</sup> (62). Algiers is no

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<sup>33</sup> Anne began to think: in this strange city, drunk with the sun but with prisons high up on every street, does every woman live first for herself or for the chain of women once locked in, generation after generation, while the same light, an unchangeable, rarely dimmed blue, continues to pour forth? (48)

<sup>34</sup> “I’m not leaving!... I’m not going anymore!... One day we’ll take the boat together... Not to go away, no, to gaze at the city when all the doors are opening...” (51-52)



longer a place of death for Anne, but a place of opportunities; Anne speaks of the future, and more importantly, she speaks in the plural. When she speaks of her life, it is not a solitary life, nor does it revolve solely around other people, as it did when she first recounted her story to Sarah. Instead, her life is the story of “us,” of Anne and Sarah. She has adopted an identity that is “embedded in relational matrices” that simultaneously allow her to maintain her sense of agency but also draw from the strength and experiences of others (*IS* 11).

### Sarah

Though the two women’s healing processes are intertwined, Sarah’s healing takes a different path than Anne’s. Like her friend, Sarah is presented as an isolated figure, and her familial relationships are superficial. As she drives to Anne’s apartment, she asks herself, “Est-ce seulement avec Ali, est-ce avec eux tous?... Quand les autres me parlent, leurs mots sont détachés... Ils flottent avant de me parvenir!... Est-ce pareil quand je parle, si je parle ? Ma voix ne les atteint pas. Elle reste intérieure”<sup>35</sup> (13) [Djebar’s ellipses]. Like Anne, Sarah feels disconnected from all those around her, even her husband. We learn eventually that Sarah’s isolation can be traced back to her time in prison during the revolution. She recalls: “Au moment d’épouser Ali, elle avait longtemps hésité: non parce qu’Ali, veuf, avait un enfant à élever, non, pour le mariage, tout bonnement... Après une adolescence passée en prison—des chambres murmurantes, pleines de compagnes—, elle

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<sup>35</sup> “Is it only with Ali, is it with all of them?... When others talk to me, their words aren’t connected... They float around before they reach me!... Is it the same when I talk, if I talk? My voice doesn’t reach them. It stays inside.” (7)

avait prolongé outre mesure ses années d'université"<sup>36</sup> (35) [Djebar's ellipsis]. The very idea of marriage—of forming a new relational bond—frightens Sarah to the point where she chooses an unnaturally prolonged period of university studies over marriage. Victoria Best, in an analysis of Djebar's afterword, argues that "the prospect of a lengthy and hopeless incarceration robs women of their relationship to their bodies, [and] in many ways they cease to perceive the space around them, either fleshy or concrete" (876). However, in Sarah's case it is clear that her wounds are not caused solely by her imprisonment. While she is in prison, she is conscious of a sense of companionship—the word "compagnes" indicates a sense of solidarity, if not intimacy—whereas her life after her release is marked by a fear of intimacy.

Indeed, Sarah's trauma even affects her relational bonds from the pre-war period, for she finds herself unable to share her pain with Anne. As Sarah undresses in the hammam, Anne notices

La cicatrice large et bleuâtre de son amie.

--Une brûlure? Demanda-t-elle en la touchant lentement, tout le long de l'abdomen.

Sarah ne répondit pas. « Blessure de guerre », devrait-elle dire, probablement sur un ton mélodramatique. Anne ignorait tout de la ville au cours de la période passée de feu et de meurtres : femmes dehors sous la mitraille, voiles blancs que trouaient des taches de sang...<sup>37</sup> (43) [Djebar's ellipsis]

Though Sarah and Anne have been friends for a long time, there is a rupture in their relational bond because the trauma of the war has become an integral part of Sarah's

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<sup>36</sup> When it came to marrying Ali, she had hesitated for a long time; not because Ali, a widower, had a child to raise, no, very simply because of the marriage itself... After having spent her adolescence in prison—rooms full of murmurs, full of whispering comrades—she had prolonged her years at the university beyond limits. (27-28)

<sup>37</sup> her friend's wide, bluish scar. "A burn?" she asked, touching it lightly along her abdomen.

Sarah didn't respond. She ought to say, probably in a melodramatic tone of voice at that, "a war injury." Anne knew nothing about the city during the period of fire and murders just past: women outside under attack by submachine guns, white veils with bloodstained holes... (34)

identity, and it is a part of her personal history that Anne does not share. Moreover, Sarah does not feel that she can share this part of her past with Anne—the only way she can imagine telling Anne the story of her scar is in a trite, melodramatic way, using a cliché that tells nothing of Sarah’s true experience of the war. However, the revelation of the scar does help us to understand one of the causes of Sarah’s isolation. As Joshua Cole observes, torture was used in the war specifically to destroy relational bonds; he explains: “Torture and rape were about establishing a particular relationship between French soldiers and Algerian Muslims, one in which the most essential parts of the victim’s personality—the integrity of their bodies, their relations with their families, their connections to a religion, a cause—were annihilated” (133). Moreover, the mechanism by which this takes place is in direct opposition to the process of intimate selving. Cole describes torture as a pathological form of relationality:

Torture is an intimate violation of one person’s body by another—it possesses the same sweaty closeness and proximity as an act of love, the same casual familiarity with the most private recesses of the body, its fluids, and smells. It is precisely because of this similarity to other intimate acts that torture has such powerful psychological effects on its victims and such apparent attractions for those who come to commit such acts. Of course, what distinguishes torture from other forms of intimacy, and makes even the use of the word in such a context seem perverse, is the absolute wall or separation that is constructed between two individuals who are brought together by the act. (133)

Whereas intimate selving is a process by which boundaries between selves are made fluid through embeddedness (*IS* 12), torture is a process in which a pathological form of physical closeness leads to the creation of psychic boundaries, first between the torturer and the victim, and then between the victim and all others. It is precisely the similarity between the two processes that allow relational bonds to be replaced by psychic walls,

and it is this pathological form of relationality that has displaced Sarah's relational bonds with Anne.

However, it is through her memory of torture that Sarah is able to enter the first stage of her healing process. Sarah's healing begins with a long conversation that she has with Leila, a fellow freedom fighter who was also imprisoned and tortured during the war. Leila's experience was not unlike Sarah's, though her reaction was much more dramatic. Whereas Sarah has buried her pain, Leila's has caused her to have a nervous breakdown, for which she was committed to a psychiatric hospital. Ali's painter friend discovers her there, "isolée, enfermée depuis quatre ou cinq jours... Condamnée à mort à vingt ans, des années de prison hier et on l'enfermait encore?"<sup>38</sup> (28). After the painter rescues her from the hospital, Leila listens to an old record from her childhood and reflects on her pain:

Sur le lit, en écoutant sans relâche le même disque, Leila se replongeait dans les images flottantes de son cauchemar: regards de femmes voilées en blanc ou en noir mais le visage libre, qui pleuraient silencieusement, comme derrière une vitre. Et Leila se disait, le corps endolori, qu'elles pleuraient, ces tantes et ces aïeules disparues, sur elle, sur sa mémoire défaite.<sup>39</sup> (29)

In her nightmare, Leila sees women who are connected to her—though it is unclear if she is using the terms "aunts" and "ancestors" literally or figuratively, the words nonetheless convey a sense of connectedness—but they are separated from her. The psychic wall described by Cole manifests itself in Leila's dream in the form of a window, which blocks both physical contact and the sound of the women's weeping. Moreover, both

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<sup>38</sup> "in isolation, locked up for four or five days now... Condemned to death at age twenty, after that years of imprisonment, and again they lock her up?" (21)

<sup>39</sup> On the bed, listening to the same record over and over again, Leila plunged back into the drifting images of her nightmare: the looks of women veiled in white or black but their faces freed, who were weeping silently, as if behind a windowpane. And Leila was telling herself, her body in pain, that they, these disappeared aunts and grandmothers, were weeping over her, over her dismantled memory. (22)

Leila and the women have ceased to exist: the old women have “disappeared,” and Leila’s memory is dismantled, undone. Though the women are weeping for Leila, their relational bonds with her are blocked.

Though it requires no small amount of persuasion, Leila is able to form a relational bond with Sarah that serves to heal Leila and open Sarah to the process of intimate selving, which she will later complete with Anne. Leila opens the conversation: “Ils ont proclamé partout que j’avais été torturée... L’électricité, tu sais toi aussi ce que c’est!”<sup>40</sup> (54) [Djebar’s ellipsis]. Through their shared experience of torture, the women find something that they have in common, and Leila senses a bond with her fellow *porteuse de feu*. Just as the act of torture replaced relationality with a psychic wall, Leila attempts to replace the wall with relational bonds between herself and Sarah. Indeed, Leila refers to all of the bomb carriers as “vous mes soeurs qui auraient dû libérer la ville”<sup>41</sup> (54). Leila sees herself as a part of a network of women whose attempts at liberation failed, leaving them prisoners in their own country, just as cooke describes (“Arab Women” 17). Leila goes on to describe her experiences from the war, but Sarah asks her to stop, crying “[M]a chérie, tais-toi, ne parle plus!... Les mots, qu’est-ce que les mots?”<sup>42</sup> (55) [Djebar’s ellipsis]. Leila responds that sharing one’s story is essential to healing and encourages Sarah to do so:

Au contraire!... Il me faut parler, Sarah! Ils ont honte de moi! Je me suis desséchée, je suis mon ombre d’autrefois... Peut-être parce que j’ai trop déclamé dans les tribunaux d’hier, je suis trop entrée en transes publiques et quand les frères applaudissaient, je croyais... (elle rit). Y a-t-il jamais

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<sup>40</sup> “Everywhere they’ve proclaimed that I’d been tortured... Tortured with electricity, you too know what that’s all about!...” (44)

<sup>41</sup> “you my sisters, who should have liberated the city” (44)

<sup>42</sup> “[B]e quiet, my darling, don’t talk anymore!... Words, what good are words?” (45)

eu de frères, Sarah... dis ?... Toi... On t'appelait déjà la silencieuse... On n'a jamais su les détails bien répertoriés de tes tortures à toi ! On t'a soignée ensuite comme moi, on a cru ne te laisser que quelques cicatrices, on n'a jamais su... (55)<sup>43</sup>

Gracki describes this narrative as a “contrapuntal image of wounds which are not healed” (836). Even after the war has supposedly ended, the fighting is still going on, but now “the brothers are no longer fighting alongside the sisters but rather against them” (836). Although Gracki discusses the value of inscribing women’s voices into the national narrative of the war, it is clear that this is not sufficient for Leila; public testimony has not served Leila well. She believed that she had the support of her “brothers,” the men alongside whom she fought for Algeria’s freedom, but she realizes in retrospect that the bond that she felt with those men was one-sided at best. Likewise, her bond with Sarah is currently one-sided; though Leila has shared the horrors that she experienced, Sarah has maintained the silence for which she is so well-known. Sarah acknowledges her silence:

“J’ai toujours eu des problèmes avec les mots!” songeait Sarah qui se dévêtait de son corsage, la face encore en larmes. Elle dévoila la cicatrice bleue au-dessus d’un sein, qui se prolongeait à l’abdomen.

Sarah ressentit un élan purement sensuel... Elle chercha en sourd-muette des mots d’amour, mots informels, en quelle langue trouver les mots, comme des grottes ou des tourbillons de tendresse. Mais elle ne bougeait pas et tout s’exaspéra en elle quand elle referma lentement son corsage. (55)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> On the contrary... I’ve got to speak, Sarah! They are ashamed of me. I’ve dried up, I’m the shadow of my former self... Perhaps because I’ve held forth too much in yesterday’s tribunals, I’ve entered the public frenzy once too often, and when the brothers were applauding I thought... (she laughs). Were there ever really any brothers, Sarah... tell me, were there?... You... Even then, they already called you the silent one... They never knew the carefully listed details of your own tortures. Afterwards they took care of you as they now do of me, they thought you were left with just a few scars, they never knew... (45)

<sup>44</sup> “I’ve always had a hard time with words,” Sarah mused as she undid her blouse, her face still wet with tears. She uncovered the blue scar that started above one of her breasts and stretched down to her abdomen.

Sarah felt a purely sensual rush... She looked for words, like a deaf-mute, words of love, informal words, but words in what language, like grottos or whirlwinds of tenderness. But she didn’t move and became exasperated with herself when she slowly buttoned her blouse again. (45)

Sarah has begun to break her silence; whereas she refused to discuss her scar with Anne, she willingly shares the scar, albeit wordlessly, with Leila. She shares her story through sharing her body, and in doing so, she feels a bond with another person for the first time in the story. She cannot yet express her love for Leila, but she has a desire to do so. Despite the lack of words, however, Sarah and Leila have engaged in intimate selfing: their sharing of the self is dynamic, reactive, and mutual. Through her act of sharing, Leila has influenced Sarah to re-examine her own wounds, and thus the two women's selves "transform over the course of personal and social history" (*IS* 2).

It is not until the next day that Sarah finally shares herself fully, and this sharing occurs not with Leila, but with Anne. She begins by explaining to her friend:

Je ne vois pour nous aucune autre issue que par cette rencontre: une femme qui parle devant une autre qui regarde, celle qui parle raconte-t-elle l'autre aux yeux dévorants, à la mémoire noire ou décrit-elle sa propre nuit, avec des mots torches et des bougies dont la cire fond trop vite ? Celle qui regarde, est-ce à force d'écouter et de se rappeler qu'elle finit par se voir elle-même, avec son propre regard, sans voile enfin... (57)<sup>45</sup>  
[Djebar's ellipsis]

Healing occurs, according to Sarah, only when the sharing of stories becomes a mutual sharing of the self, when the speaker tells the listener's story and the listener sees herself in the speaker's story. Each participant must recognize something of herself in the other; mere testimony is not sufficient. While it is important that "a collective oral history transmitted by women...be inscribed into the fabric of Algeria's past" (Gracki 836), testimony and memory only constitute a part of the healing process. The other part of the healing process, the part that Sarah describes here, is a process in which women engage

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<sup>45</sup> I see no other way out for us except through an encounter like this: a woman speaking in front of another one who's watching; does the one who's speaking tell the story of the other one with the devouring eyes, with the black memories, or is she describing her own dark night with words like torches and with candles whose wax melts too fast? She who watches, is it by means of listening, of listening and remembering that she ends up seeing herself, with her own eyes, unveiled at last... (47)

in mutual sharing of their selves, “shap[ing] and [being] shaped” by the other (*IS* 2) in such a way that personal boundaries become fluid so that “persons feel a part of significant others” (*IS* 12). In order for testimony to heal, it must take the form of a mutual sharing that shapes both the speaker and the listener, to the point where the roles of listener and speaker become fluid and the boundaries between speaking and listening/witnessing are blurred, so that the process is one of sharing, rather than merely imparting or receiving testimony.

Finally, Sarah reveals to Anne the roots of her wounds: the trauma that has haunted her for so many years was the death of her mother and the potential destruction of all relational bonds that Sarah had formed in her life. She explains to Anne:

Le jour le plus difficile...le plus long jour durant ces années d'enfermement... On vint m'apprendre au parloir que ma mère était morte, morte brusquement! Je n'ai pas pleuré. Je n'ai pas pu ! Je n'oublierai pas ce qui m'a ensuite déchirée... Peut-être parce que j'ai appris cette morte dans ce lieu...

Je crois que j'ai dû penser : je ne sortirai plus de cette prison-là ! Depuis ce jour (je suis restée à Barberousse encore une année), c'était comme si mon corps, à chaque mouvement, heurtait les murs. Je hurlais silencieusement... Les autres ne percevaient que mon silence. Leila l'a redit encore hier : j'étais une prisonnière muette... des années après Barberousse, je portais encore en moi ma propre prison...

Ma mère morte... Sa vie où rien ne s'est passé. Un seul drame pour elle: elle m'a eue, puis plus rien, pas un fils, pas un autre enfant! Elle a dû vivre alors dans la peur d'être répudiée, je suppose ! Cela, je ne l'ai pensé qu'ensuite, après sa mort, tandis que mes compagnes de cellule tentaient de me consoler... Ce fut comme si ma mère, assise et immobile, s'était jointe à nous, dans la prison ! (57-58)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The most difficult day... the longest day in all those years of being locked up... They came to tell me that my mother had died, had died quite suddenly. I didn't cry. I couldn't. I'll never forget what tore me apart later... Perhaps because I learned of her death in that place?...

I believe I must have had the thought that I'd never leave the prison again. From that day on (I spent another year in Barberousse prison) it was as if, with every movement, my body ran into the walls. Silently I was shrieking... The others noticed nothing but my silence. Leila said it only yesterday: I was a voiceless prisoner... for years after Barberousse I was still carrying my own prison around inside me...

My dead mother... Her life in which nothing happened. One tragedy only: she had me, no other child, no son, no one else. She must have lived in fear of being repudiated then, I suppose. I didn't think of



With this revelation, Best's argument that "the prospect of a lengthy and hopeless incarceration robs women of their relationship to their bodies" (876) rings somewhat more true. However, there are two important exceptions: first, Sarah is not robbed of a relationship to her body, but rather of a relationship to her self, specifically her embedded self. Secondly, it is not the walls of Barberousse that form Sarah's seemingly inescapable prison; rather, she is imprisoned by the walls of her "bounded, separate,...autonomous" self (*IS* 12). Moreover, Sarah sees her mother as a captive in that same prison. As her only daughter, Sarah fears that her mother's line, and therefore her memory, would die with Sarah. Though she senses that her mother had joined her in Barberousse, there is no intimate selving, for the prison is not a place of companionship, but rather a place of isolation and silence. Her mother is not a living presence in the prison; she is "seated and immobile." Sarah finds herself surrounded by bounded selves who are unable to engage in any form of embeddedness. Even after she is released from prison, she carries this wound with her, never sharing it with anyone. This, the reader now understands, is the reason for her inability to sense an intimate connection even with her husband and her best friends. She elaborates:

Mais ma mère et son ombre tassée, elle qui n'avait jamais déclaré haut ses peurs, ni ses joies, qui n'avait même pas gémi, comme tant d'autres que je connais, ni maudit, ni étouffé bruyamment, ma mère, comme si je n'arrivais pas à la libérer !... J'ai beau circuler dehors, conduire ma vie au jour le jour en improvisant et vraiment à ma guise, j'ai beau jouir, il faut bien dire le mot, de toute cette « liberté », or une seule question me taraude : cette liberté-là, est-elle vraiment à moi ? Ma mère est morte, sans même concevoir en idée cette vie zigzagante qui est mienne !... Anne, que

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that until later, after she died, while my cell mates were trying to console me... It was as if my mother, seated and motionless, had joined me in prison. (47-48)

faut-il faire ? S'enfermer à nouveau, se remettre à pleurer, revivre pour elle ? (60)<sup>47</sup>

Freedom, Sarah realizes, is meaningless if it is solitary. If other women are imprisoned, whether it be behind physical walls or psychic ones, there can be no intimate selving and therefore no true freedom. Sarah could not know her mother, for she never shared her self—her fears and joys, the pain or anger. Instead, the mother remained a shadow, an outline that is recognizable but lacking in details. Likewise, Sarah never had the opportunity to share the pain of her wartime experience with her mother, as she died before Sarah was released from Barberousse. Sarah lives in a world that her mother never knew and never could know, and thus the two women remain strangers to each other. Sarah remains imprisoned by her mother's death until she is able to share her mother's story with Anne and therefore free both herself and her mother. It is important to understand that this sharing is not a part of a "collective oral history...inscribed into the fabric of Algeria's past" (Gracki 836), but rather a part of "a community traumatized by the Algerian War of Independence and seeking to reconstitute itself in an authentic postcolonial way" (Best 873). However, I am defining this "authentic postcolonial way" differently from Best. Whereas Best is concerned with defining women's roles within the newly-formed Algerian society, I am concerned here with women's reconstitution of their selves within a network of selves that privileges neither the individual nor the collective and in which women maintain their agency.

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<sup>47</sup> But my mother cast a shrunken yet stubborn shadow, she who'd never declared her fears out loud, or her joys, who'd never even moaned like so many other women I know, who'd never cursed anyone, nor noisily choked down any sounds, my mother, it was as if I couldn't manage to set her free!... I can go out all I want, lead my life one day at a time, improvising as I go and in whatever way I see fit really, try as I might to enjoy all my "freedom"—to call it by its true name—but one single question keeps plaguing me, this freedom, is it really mine? My mother died without even conceiving of the idea of a life like mine, with its twists and turns... Anne, what should we do? Lock ourselves in again, begin to weep for her again, live again for her? (49-50)

Sarah finally explains to Anne how women may form such networks: “Je ne vois pour les femmes arabes qu’un seul moyen de tout débloquer: parler, parler sans cesse d’hier et d’aujourd’hui, parler entre nous, dans tous les gynécées, les traditionnels et ceux des H.L.M. Parler entre nous et regarder. Regarder dehors, regarder hors des murs et des prisons !... La femme-regard et la femme-voix...” (60-61).<sup>48</sup> Her use of the word “débloquer” is important: the ultimate goal is to remove barriers, to eliminate that which blocks connections between women. Memory and testimony are essential to healing, but healing in this work goes beyond “the exploration of repressed memories” (Ireland 203). Speaking, for Sarah, is a means of reconstructing the self through mutual sharing of the self. Women must not only speak; they must speak with each other and thus connect with each other. Women must create shared spaces in which to heal, in contrast to the solitary prisons in which they have been enclosed. The form of healing that Sarah proposes differs from testimony in that the sharing of the self must be reciprocal—Sarah insists that women speak “amongst” themselves rather than merely speaking in front of others. Rather than a situation in which there is one speaker and one or more listeners/watchers, Sarah calls for women to be both “[l]a femme-regard et la femme-voix,” both witness and speaker. Through intimate selving, women first remove the barriers between themselves, thus empowering them to tear down the walls of the prisons in which the male-dominated Algerian society has enclosed them.

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<sup>48</sup> For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in the women’s quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk amongst ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! . . . The Woman as look and the Woman as voice . . . (50)

## Conclusion

Although Anne's and Sarah's experiences during and after the war differ greatly, both their wounds and their healing processes can be traced to intimate selving. Anne, as an exile from her native land, finds herself suffering from what Said describes as "a discontinuous state of being" (140). Though Said attributes this discontinuity to a myriad of causes, including a separation from geography, history, and state, he also notes that the exile is cut off from her roots and family. By leaving Algeria, Anne has lost the nourishment of "webs of relationships" that "actively defin[e] self and other" (*IS* 15). By removing herself from her relational networks, Anne has not only uprooted herself; she has uprooted her self, depriving it of the relationality necessary for healthy selving. Sarah, on the other hand, has found her process of relationality disrupted by torture and by the loss of her mother. The torture that she experienced was not merely physical violence—as Cole observes, "Torture and rape were about establishing a particular relationship between French soldiers and Algerian Muslims, one in which the most essential parts of [the] victim's personality—the integrity of their bodies, their relations with their families, their connection to a religion, a cause—were annihilated" (133). Through a pathological form of relationality, which Cole describes as a sort of toxic mirror image of love, Sarah's French captors severed her existing healthy relational bonds and replaced them with pathological bonds. Sarah's sense of self becomes further disrupted by the death of her mother; deprived of the opportunity to renew her relational bond with her mother upon her release, Sarah finds herself in a new sort of prison. Whereas Best argues that "the prospect of a lengthy and hopeless incarceration robs women of their relationship to their bodies" (876), it is not the physical prison that traps

Sarah, but a psychic one, and this prison robs Sarah of her relationship to her intimate self.

The means by which the two women heal their wounds is a superb illustration of intimate selving both as an active process, “an activity or intention,” (*IS* 12) and as a form of networking (*IS* 11). The process begins when Leila shares her self with Sarah, who in turn shares her story with Anne. Through this process of sharing, both Sarah and Anne recognize themselves as part of a “chain” of women whose stories, lives, and selves are linked, and that, as Joseph notes, the women in this chain gain strength and agency through their embeddedness (*IS* 2). It is important to note here that testimony in and of itself is not sufficient for healing; rather, it is one tool in a healing process that cannot be complete without the act of intimate selving. Healing, as Sarah declares, takes place when one becomes both “la femme-regard” and “la femme-voix,” both listener and speaker, shaping the other as the other shapes her (*IS* 2). The sharing that takes place is not merely a form of anamnesis; while I do recognize, like Donadey, “the need for as many forms of testimony as possible if anamnesis is to take place” (“Anamnesis” 51), collective memory and unforgetting are only a part of the healing process. The other purpose of memory and testimony is to establish relational bonds between individuals in a way that privileges neither the individual nor the collective, but rather the relations between individuals that create a sense of unity (*IS* 11).

### Successful and Blocked Intimate Selving in “Day of Ramadan”<sup>49</sup>

Just as in Sarah’s story, prisons are central to “Day of Ramadan,” the fifth story in Djébar’s collection, though they play a somewhat different role in this story than in “Women of Algiers.” Indeed, in this story we see one female character who is able to avoid the wounds of wartime imprisonment, while her sister is unable to overcome the wounds of her own enclosure. In my analysis of this story, I will identify the means by which Nfissa, the older sister, is able to avoid the psychic wounds that Sarah experiences as a result of her imprisonment, and I will also identify the means by which Nadja, Nfissa’s younger sister, is imprisoned as a result of the war and the reasons for her inability to escape her prison.

The story opens during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, with Nfissa and her sisters sitting in the house—from which their father is conspicuously absent, having gone out for some unspecified purpose—reminiscing about Ramadans past. Nfissa silently recalls one Ramadan that she spent in prison with five other women, “six ‘rebels,’” presumably participants in the Algerian Revolution, although never explicitly named as such. Nfissa remembers:

Elles avaient commencé le jeûne avec une allégresse d’ascète: l’exil et les chaînes devenaient immatériels, une délivrance du corps qui tourne dans la cellule mais ne se cogne soudain plus aux murs; deux françaises arrêtées dans le même réseau s’étaient jointes à l’observance islamique et, malgré la fadeur de la soupe au crépuscule, comme le repos se creusait au-delà des heures grises comme le chant des veillées, malgré la garde, semblait franchir la mer, rejoindre les montagnes du pays! (132)<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Nfissa, one of the primary characters in this story, appears in a more prominent role in Djébar’s 1967 novel *Les alouettes naïves*. This analysis is only concerned with the representation of the character in the short story and does not take the novel into account at all.

<sup>50</sup> They had begun the fast with the cheerfulness of the ascetic: exile and chains had become immaterial, a deliverance from the body that runs around in circles inside the cell but suddenly no longer runs up against the walls; two French women who’d been arrested in the same network had joined the Islamic observance and, despite the blandness of the evening soup, how peace of mind superseded the gray hours, how the

This experience of prison is unexpected; Best writes of this collection as a response to Delacroix's representation of Algerian women imprisoned in the Western harem of the canvas, a context in which "the prospect of a lengthy and hopeless incarceration robs women of their relationship to their bodies" (876). However, this is not the case with Nfissa. Indeed, the process of intimate selving removes the prison walls that surround her and her comrades. As Nfissa and her three Muslim comrades begin their fast, the two French women join them out of solidarity. United in their hunger, the six women are able to transcend their suffering—"exile and chains had become immaterial, a deliverance from the body that runs around in circles inside the cell but suddenly no longer runs up against the walls" (120). The prison, traditionally a locus of suffering, is thus transformed into a place of healing, where a small community of women sacrifices their individual need for food in favor of their collective need to overcome the stifling atmosphere of the prison. Indeed, their communion is so powerful that it permits them to achieve a psychic escape from the prison, traversing the sea "to reunite them with their country's mountains." The act of fasting allows the women to engage in a form of "intimate relationality" that "do[es] not conform to the individualist, separative, bounded, autonomous constructs subscribed to in much of Western psychodynamic theory" (*IS 2*). By erasing the boundaries that separate their individual selves, the prisoners were also able to erase the physical and psychic walls of the prison and thus avoid the damaging effects of imprisonment that we see in "Women of Algiers." It is important to note that torture is never mentioned as a component of Nfissa's prison experience; this certainly has a significant effect on her ability to survive her imprisonment without the degree of

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evening song, despite the guards, seemed to clear the distance across the sea, to reunite them with their country's mountains! (120)

psychic damage that Sarah experiences. However, her ability to engage in intimate selving is a central part of her survival technique, and it is clear from her story that the sense of solidarity that she developed with the other prisoners is in large part responsible for her ability to leave the prison comparatively unscathed.

Nadjia, Nfissa's younger sister, is unable to feel such a sense of community. The narrator identifies the house as a feminine space, noting that it was becoming "une royaume de femmes, le père ne reentrant qu'au soleil couchant" (133),<sup>51</sup> but Nadjia cannot escape her father's oppression even in his absence, and she remains separate from her sisters. Her self-centeredness becomes evident when she brags about her cheerful fasting: "Jeûner dans les rires et la joie! Déclara-t-elle, faussement gaie. Mon carême comptera double!" (133).<sup>52</sup> Unlike Nfissa's cellmates, who fasted selflessly, Nadjia's fast is wholly self-centered. She feels compelled to one-up her sisters, to prove that her fast is better than theirs, but her joy is false, which, in fact, defeats the purpose of the fast. Furthermore, fasting may even be dangerous for her, as she is described as being "[d']une minceur presque inquiétante" (133).<sup>53</sup> It is also notable that Nadjia speaks in the singular, whereas Nfissa's story is told in the plural; while Nadjia is an isolated figure, even surrounded by her family, Nfissa is part of a connected group of women. Nfissa gains strength through her relational bonds, while Nadjia's weakness comes from her failure to maintain such bonds. She feigns gaiety not in order to share a positive experience with her family, but rather to prove herself better than them, and because this gaiety is false,

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<sup>51</sup> "a woman's kingdom, with the father not returning until sunset" (121)

<sup>52</sup> "Fasting with laughter and joy,' she declared with false cheer, 'My fast will count doubly!'" (120)

<sup>53</sup> "thin to the point of being worrisome" (120)



she gains nothing from it. Nadjia's behavior makes it clear that she is both unable to relate to herself (Best 876), but also to others.

Immediately after Nadjia declares her joy, she proves its falsity by snapping at Nfissa, claiming that she has suffered just as much as Nfissa and that the home has been just as much a prison for Nadjia as Nfissa's prison was for her. She tells Nfissa, "Moi aussi, je me souviens! Si toi, tu as connu la prison, moi je l'ai connue aussi, mais ici même, dans cette maison que tu trouves merveilleuse" (133).<sup>54</sup> The reason for Nadjia's resentment is that "pendant les deux dernières années de la guerre, le père avait fait interrompre à Nadjia ses études. Celle-ci, depuis l'indépendance, voulait les reprendre, aller en ville et travailler, être institutrice ou étudiante, n'importe mais travailler" (133).<sup>55</sup> Nadjia's prison is both a physical one—she is confined to the house—and a psychic one. By forbidding her to finish her studies, Nadjia's father has robbed her of a relationship to her self. He has not deprived her of a relationship to her body, as Best argues (876), but rather of a social role to which she aspires. As Best observes, this form of confinement is a common situation for women in post-war Algeria, where the "act of confinement, of mapping out the space within which women may exist, is all about investing arbitrary borderlines with excessive significance, both in terms of national and gender identity" (873). However, the borderlines that Nadjia's father has created do not merely contain her physically, but they also create barriers between Nadjia and other individuals. When Nfissa tries to draw Nadjia into the circle of women visitors, Nadjia fails to recognize an

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<sup>54</sup> "I remember too! You may have been imprisoned, but I too was in prison, right here, in this very house you think is so wonderful" (121)

<sup>55</sup> "during the last two years of the war, the father had made Nadjia stop her studies. Since the independence, she wanted to pick them up again, wanted to go to the city and work, be a teacher or a student..." (121)

opportunity for community and healing. Rather than accepting her sister's invitation, she scoffs: "Papoter, manger des gâteaux, s'empiffrer en attendant le lendemain, est-ce pour cela qu'il y a eu deuil et sang?... Moi... je croyais que tout cela changerait, qu'autre chose viendrait, que..." (134).<sup>56</sup> Nadjia fails to understand that Ramadan is not about food, but about community, and that the meal is more than nourishment for the body; it is nourishment for the community of women. Much like the women of Algeria who believed that the revolution, for which they sacrificed so much, would create a new society with a new place for them, Nadjia believed that her own life would change once the war was over. Her father, however, shattered this dream by prohibiting Nadjia from completing her studies. Just as the new Algeria prohibits women from fully participating in society, Nadjia's father blocks her from fully participating in familial life. Moreover, by doing so, he deprives Nadjia of her agency, for, as Joseph argues, "[t]he agency of the self is situated, contextual, and relational" (*IS* 15).

Such is not the case for Nfissa. Whereas Sarah's prison walls create a toxic enclosure, a place of solitude, Nfissa transforms the prison from a place of isolation to a place of healing, where "the evening song, despite the guards, seemed to clear the distance across the sea, to reunite [her] with [her] country's mountains" (120). Rather than seeing the prison walls as barriers that separate her from others, Nfissa treats them as the boundaries of a healing space, a space that she shares with other women. Though she was imprisoned, she, unlike Sarah, is not alone. Nadjia, on the other hand, is imprisoned both by her father's insistence that she discontinue her studies and by her self-centered

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<sup>56</sup> "All that babbling, eating cakes, gorging oneself before morning, is that why we've suffered bloodshed and mourning? . . . I thought, you see, that all this would change, that something else would happen, that . . ." (122)

attitude. Her failure to participate in the community of women creates a wall around her that both encloses her toxicity and separates her from the healing bonds with her family.

## **Conclusion**

The approach to healing discussed in this chapter adds three new dimensions to the current discourse on healing in the wake of the Algerian War. First, this is the first in-depth analysis of literary representations of healing; to date, criticism of Djébar's writings on warfare have focused on her writing process as a means of healing, and analysis of the characters' healing process is conflated with analysis of Djébar's own healing process. Secondly, this analysis breaks down the individual/collective binary that permeates current scholarship on healing. This is particularly relevant, as current scholarship privileges the collective over the individual. Ireland speaks of a "drame de mémoire collective" (203), while Best describes Algeria's women as a traumatized community "seeking to reconstitute itself in an authentic postcolonial way" (873). This study, however, is concerned with individuals reconstituting themselves through a process of relationality that privileges neither the individual nor the collective. Finally, and most significantly, I have provided an alternative to memory and testimony as forms of healing. Though I do not dispute the importance of these two tools in the healing process, they have generally been used as a means of healing the nation without addressing the individual self. Intimate healing resolves this problem by offering a means of healing that simultaneously heals the individual and the collective by breaking down the boundaries between the two.

As a writer, Djébar does not merely engage in an act of testimony; rather, she engages to a certain degree with a worldwide network of female voices. The engagement is not wholly reciprocal, as the engagement takes place through the medium of writing, and Djébar fails to acknowledge the cultural and local specificity of women's lived experiences of oppression. However, Djébar does recognize herself as a distinct, but non-autonomous, part of a collective and she does emphasize through her writing process the importance of mutual sharing of women's voices as a means of healing.

Her characters engage in the process of intimate selfing to varying degrees, depending upon the causes of their individual wounds. Anne, having lived a life of exile since the revolution, longs for a sense of belonging. By observing communities of women in the *hammam* and then by listening to women sharing stories of suffering, she finally recognizes herself as a member of a "chain" of women (*Femmes* 58). This sense of belonging gives her the motivation to remain in Algeria, where she may then experience the sense of belonging that eluded her in France. Sarah, on the other hand, has not been exiled, but rather imprisoned. Unable to overcome the pain of her mother's death or the memory of torture, she has not been able to connect with anyone, nor has she been able to voice her pain. This changes when Sarah talks to Leila, who has shared her experience of torture. Leila insists that sharing her story is the only way to overcome the pain of the war and her subsequent rejection by her comrades (*Femmes* 55). It is this interaction that helps Sarah to realize that mutual sharing of stories is a necessary survival technique for the women who have survived the violence of the war only to be re-colonized under the male-dominated Algerian republic (*Femmes* 60-61). Nfissa, like Sarah, was imprisoned during the war, but she did not experience the isolation that Sarah did. This is in part due

to the apparent lack of torture, but her ability to escape the experience relatively unscathed can also be attributed to the community of women that formed in Nfissa's prison cell. The shared experience of the Ramadan fast enabled the prisoners to escape the chains and walls of the prison, and the sense of community that developed among the women enabled them to avoid the severe psychic wounds that Sarah experienced in Barberousse (*Femmes* 132). Nadjia, on the other hand, has been imprisoned, not by the French, but by her father (*Femmes* 133). His refusal to allow Nadjia to realize her dreams renders Nadjia unable to recognize the value of relational bonds, and she separates herself from the rest of the family. While her sister Nfissa found community in the Ramadan fast, Nadjia is disgusted by the Ramadan feast because she cannot recognize it as a form of communion. Though the four women have very different experiences of the war, it is evident that intimate selving is an important tool for surviving and healing the various wounds of war.

While this process of intimate selving does rely heavily on memory and testimony, it is important to note that, contrary to the contentions of many critics of Djébar, memory and testimony do not necessarily constitute a complete form of healing. In the two stories discussed in this chapter, memory and testimony are important tools in the process of intimate selving, but healing does not occur until these tools permit the formation of relational bonds. For most critics, healing comes through collective memory: Ireland refers to healing through a "productive form of collective remembering" (204), while Gracki emphasizes "a collective oral history transmitted by women" (836). However, this form of memory is not an ideal form of healing because it allows the individual to be subsumed by the collective, whereas Joseph insists upon the importance

of a form of selving that is “neither individualist nor corporatist” (*IS* 11). Healing through intimate selving consists of a form of memory in which individual voices are linked without being conflated; shared experiences are just as important as individual differences, and each woman is a distinct member of a network, rather than a part of a uniform collective. Moreover, Joseph emphasizes the importance of reciprocity in testimony (*IS* 2), which is not the focus of the work of critics such as Fisher and Donadey.

One important aspect of intimate selving has been intentionally omitted from this chapter: the importance of historic and cultural specificity in the process of intimate selving (*IS* 2). This chapter discussed the ways in which Algerian women were doubly colonized, first by the French and then by the men of the Algerian republic. In the concluding chapter, I will compare this gendered colonization with the experiences of the women of Lebanon and of the former French Indochina in order to better understand the ways in which intimate selving varies in relation to different forms of oppression. In particular, I will focus on the ways in which the lines of conflict differ from country to country. In the case of the Algerian Revolution, for example, the Algerian people united against a single colonizing power, just as the women of post-war Algeria united against the male hegemonic power, leading to a form of oppositional selving; that is, the oppressed population creates a sense of self that is in opposition to the oppressor’s identity. Moreover, the women of Algeria engaged in their anti-colonial and postcolonial conflicts both within the public sphere and within the domestic sphere. As the next two chapters will demonstrate, the conflicts in Lebanon and Indochina took place along very different lines, thus resulting in very different forms of selving for the women involved.

## Chapter 3

### The Story of Lebanon

#### Introduction

Unlike the Algerian Revolution, which traces its origins to the period of French colonialism, the roots of the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990 can be traced back centuries.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, in his book *Lebanon: Fire and Embers: A History of the Lebanese Civil War*, Dilip Hiro argues that

The roots of Lebanon's brief civil war of 1958, as well as the much longer one from 1975 to 1990, lie in its history and geography. Over the centuries Lebanon's mountains became a magnet for the persecuted religious minorities of the region. But since these sects belonged to one of the two monotheistic religions at loggerheads with each other—Islam and Christianity—their mutual relationship was far from harmonious. (1)

Even a cursory study of the history of Lebanon will reveal that the numerous conflicts in Lebanon are more complex than a simple Muslim-Christian clash; entire books have been written on the origins of the fight, and many authors are in disagreement as to the exact origins of the war. The purpose of this chapter is not to examine the changing conflicts and alliances throughout Lebanese history; to do so would be an ambitious project that would contribute little to our understanding of the texts to be studied. Instead, this chapter will present a brief account of the political divisions in post-Ottoman Lebanon up through the end of the civil war. This will provide the reader with an understanding of the degree

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<sup>57</sup> Unless specified, the term “Lebanese civil war” will refer to the entirety of the 1975-1990 war.

to which Lebanese society was fragmented and the major axes along which this fragmentation took place. This historical account will lead into an analysis of a novel by Lebanese author Hanan al-Shaykh (born 1945 in Beirut). This novel, *Hekayat Zahra* (*The Story of Zahra*), is a novel published in 1980, during the early stages of the civil war, which follows the story of a young woman named Zahra through the pre-war period up through the early period of the civil war. In *The Story of Zahra*, I will examine the ways in which the title character is affected by the fragmentation of pre-war Lebanese society, as well as the ways in which the war further wounds her. That is, I will examine the challenges that Zahra faces in creating relational bonds in pre-war Lebanon and the ways in which these bonds are further destroyed by the violence of war. As with the previous chapter, I will situate the literary representation of Zahra's experiences within the historical context, but the focus will be on Zahra's experiences as described in the novel. I will then interrogate the degree to which Zahra's wounds can truly be attributed to the war. Finally, I will challenge miriam cooke's argument that Zahra's death constitutes a form of healing by comparing cooke's analysis of Zahra's death scene with my own analysis, which defines healing as the creation of a healthy self through intimate selving. This chapter, then, will be primarily an analysis of blocked healing, much like Nadja's story in "Day of Ramadan," rather than of successful healing. That is, I will examine the reasons for Zahra's inability to heal, rather than the means by which she heals her wounds.

*The Story of Zahra* is divided into two parts. The first part, set before the war, depicts Zahra's childhood and adolescence, focusing on her obsessive relationship with her mother, physical abuse at the hands of her father, and general neglect in favor of her



brother Ahmad. This period of her life is punctuated by rapes and subsequent abortions, and Zahra's sole refuge is the bathroom, where she obsessively picks her pimples as a means of escaping her family's abuse. After a nervous breakdown, she is sent to her uncle's home in Africa, where she is subjected to further abuse even after she marries her uncle's friend Majid. The second part of the novel follows Zahra's experiences during the war following her return to her family's house in Lebanon. Following a period of apathy brought on by confinement, Zahra decides to confront a sniper who hides on a roof in her neighborhood in hopes that she may distract him from his murderous mission. He rapes her, but she continues to return to him. Eventually she discovers that she is pregnant, but she is unable to find a doctor who is willing to perform an abortion. She tells the sniper about her pregnancy, and she believes that she has begun to form a personal connection to him. However, as she walks away from the sniper's building, he shoots her.

I have selected *The Story of Zahra* specifically because I am intrigued by cooke's argument. A professor of Asian and Middle Eastern studies at Duke University, cooke is a major critic of literature by Arab women, literature of Middle Eastern warfare, and Islamic feminism. She has published more extensively on Hanan al-Shaykh than any other critic and has written and edited numerous volumes and articles on women and warfare ("Women Write War," "~~We~~-Man," "Arab Women Arab Wars," *Women and the War Story*, *War's Other Voices*, *Women Claim Islam*, and two co-edited volumes, *Blood into Ink* and *Gendering War Talk*.) As is the case with the Algerian Revolution, much of the criticism about literature of the Lebanese civil war revolves around memory and testimony in the post-war years.<sup>58</sup> cooke's argument is interesting first because it

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Mona Takieddine Amyuni, "A Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975-1995;" Oren Barak, "'Don't Mention the War?' The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar

addresses the character's psychology rather than focusing on the writerly process as a means of healing. It is also interesting in that it addresses healing during the war rather than afterwards. Based on cooke's argument,<sup>59</sup> I would like to examine the question of whether or not healing can and does take place for Zahra during the war; however, I will define healing not as a reconciliation between one's inner and external realities, but rather as engaging in intimate selving. This will be contrasted with forms of selving that I define, based on Joseph's conception of intimate selving, as unhealthy forms of selving. That is, whereas intimate selving is not about bounded, autonomous selves (*IS* 2, 9), unhealthy selving is a process in which the self is isolated and does not take part in a network of selves. Likewise, whereas the healthy self is dynamic, reactive, and mutually engaged (*IS* 2, 12), the unhealthy self is static, or the bonds that it forms may be one-sided. The unhealthy self, unlike the healthy self (*IS* 2, 12) is deprived of agency and exists in hierarchical (or perhaps patriarchal) relationships. Finally, whereas the healthy self is neither based on an individualist model nor on a collectivist one (*IS* 11), the unhealthy self is either isolated or subsumed by a collective.

In this chapter, then, I will analyze Zahra's selving process both before and during the war in order to determine whether the war has any effect on her already damaged psyche and if so, what that effect is. Specifically, I will examine whether the war severs any relational bonds, if it allows her to create new bonds, or if there is no change in her selving process. I will also determine whether the obstacles that Zahra experiences in her

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Lebanon;" Mona Fayad, "Reinscribing Identity: Nation and Community in Arab Women's Writing;" and Marianne Marroum, "What's So Great About Home?: Roots, Nostalgia, and Return in Andrée Chedid's *La maison sans racines* and Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikyat Zahra*" [sic].

<sup>59</sup> cooke has written extensively about *The Story of Zahra*, and the argument in question is spread out over several texts, particularly "~~We~~-Man, Retelling the War Myth," *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*, and *Women and the War Story*.

selving process change after the war begins. I will pay particular attention to her relationship with the sniper in order to determine whether or not there is, as cooke contends, some sort of healing that results from Zahra's interactions with him.

### **Madness or Healing?**

Although there is a significant body of literature—both in Arabic and French—on the Lebanese civil war, the body of criticism on this literature is very limited, particularly regarding the Arabic-language texts. The criticism that has been published is dominated by miriam cooke, who places al-Shaykh in a group of writers that she calls the “Beirut Decentrists.” There is no form, style, or ideology that unites these writers—cooke describes them as “a group of women writers who have shared Beirut as their home and war as their experience. They have been decentered in a double sense: physically, they were scattered all over a self-destructing city; intellectually, they moved in separate spheres” (*War's Other Voices*<sup>60</sup> 3). In her analysis of *The Story of Zahra*, cooke makes the curious argument that war itself is a sort of cure for Zahra's madness and that Zahra “finds peace from within the logic of the war” (*WOV* 50). Zahra's pre-war childhood is marked by unhealthy relationships that result in an adult Zahra, who “[w]ith leaden passivity...had closed out the world, allowing it to work on her physically, and only later emotionally” (50). Though cooke does discuss Zahra's ailments in terms of interpersonal relationships, she is more concerned with power dynamics than with selving. Indeed, she describes Zahra's illness in terms of a failed power struggle. In the wake of her uncle's abuse, cooke argues, Zahra “was enraged by her own inability to respond. Her only

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<sup>60</sup> Hereafter referred to as *WOV*

protest was a helpless silence. It was this silence, this war within, that paralyzed her: it became her madness” (51). For cooke, Zahra’s internal war can only be cured through the external war, which makes her power struggle “normal.”

Moreover, cooke argues that solitude is a refuge for Zahra, as opposed to being the root of her ills. Both in her parents’ house and in her uncle’s house in Africa, Zahra uses the bathroom as a place to escape from her daily trials, and it is there that she engages in the ritual self-abuse of pimple-picking. For cooke, Zahra’s madness is a surrogate bathroom; she argues that Zahra’s “solitude and silence, her madness, was her refuge when bathrooms were far. It was her exclusion of all that stood in the way of her becoming a person” (WOV 52). Rather than healing herself through connections, cooke argues that Zahra heals herself by shutting herself off from others, for they are a source of illness, not a source of strength and healing. cooke contends that the arrival of the war provides a sort of healing for Zahra because it shifts her isolation from the realm of madness into normativity. “The sounds of the bullets and the bombs,” cooke declares, “finally shaped an external reality that Zahra could not relegate to hazy otherness... It forced others... to act as she had: to withdraw. It made her withdrawal normal” (WOV 54). cooke later adds, “Accepting her personal sickness, she identified it with the corporate sickness of Lebanese society and transformed that sickness as well as her own into health. The war was fully accepted and others were rejected except as the counterfoil to individual awareness” (54). For cooke, Zahra is able to heal herself during the war because her madness is consistent with the external madness of Lebanese society; it is not a question of curing madness, but of making it normal by comparison.

Most curiously, cooke claims that Zahra's relationship with the sniper is the key moment in her healing process. She declares: "The climax of Zahra's healing through the absorption into the normless chaos comes in her sexual relationship with the sniper. Timid, self-absorbed Zahra decides that she will do her bit for humanity: she will offer her abused body to the local sniper, the quintessential symbol of abstracted violence, to distract him from his deadly job" ("~~Wo~~-Man" 189-90). Because Zahra is finally able to make a decision about her body and to use it to her own ends, cooke contends, she has finally overcome the powerlessness that has dominated her life. Moreover, because Zahra is engaging in self-sacrifice for the benefit of others (the sniper cannot kill while he is sleeping with Zahra), she is able to think of others for the first time in her life, thus ending her self-centered mode of behavior.

I, however, contend that, while Zahra's madness does begin before the war, the war perpetuates her illness rather than curing it. Moreover, her ills can be traced, at least in part, to a variety of unhealthy selving practices that are sustained throughout her life. These practices include the formation and maintenance of a variety of hierarchical or otherwise unequal relationships, relationships that are physically or psychologically abusive (thus constituting an unequal power dynamic), and relationships that are not mutually shared (*IS* 2). Zahra's selving practices do not follow Joseph's definition of the healthy self as one based on reactivity, non-hierarchical relations, and agency. Zahra's pathological attachment to her mother, the physical abuse at the hands of her father, and her multiple rapes constitute an ongoing process of toxic selving that goes far beyond the simple power struggle that cooke describes (*WOV* 51). While Zahra's silence and powerlessness are certainly a contributing factor to her psychic wounds, I argue that they

are not the root cause; rather, the roots of her wounds can be traced to her failure to engage in a healthy form of intimate selving. In particular, cooke points to Zahra's lack of control over her body as the cause of her psychological problems. Zahra, cooke argues, "could not control her passions because she had never had control of her body" (52). However, all of the physical abuse that Zahra experiences is symptomatic of a pattern of toxic selving, beginning with her parents and extending to her failed attempts at romantic relationships.

Furthermore, solitude is not truly a refuge as cooke claims; rather it is a means of avoiding not only her toxic relationships, but also of blocking herself from any potentially healing bonds. By isolating herself, either with a bathroom door or with madness, Zahra is placing barriers between herself and the people with whom she has created toxic relational bonds. However, this is not a true refuge, as Zahra is not only excluding the people who are inhibiting her selving process, but she also isolates herself from any possibility of healthy intimate selving. Although the war does make withdrawal the norm, it does not make withdrawal healthy. cooke is defining mental health in terms of the norm and of accepting the external reality. However, when the norm and the external reality are toxic, one can only be considered relatively healthy compared to other unhealthy selves. The norm during the Lebanese civil war was to withdraw from society, an act that results in the severing of relational bonds; the norm, as cooke defines it, is an unhealthy self.

Finally, Zahra's relationship with the sniper cannot be considered a form of healing, as it is marked by unhealthy selving on several dimensions. Although she is engaging in consensual sex with the sniper, there is no mutual affection between them.

Zahra never even learns his name until shortly before he kills her, and they barely speak to each other when they meet. Moreover, intimate selving is supposed to privilege neither the individual nor the collective, but Zahra's relationship with the sniper is an act of sacrifice; Zahra is using her body to protect her neighbors from the sniper's gunfire, and in the process, she is destroyed. In the end, cooke describes Zahra's failure: "Although Zahra is transformed by her relationship to the war, her individual transformation has not transformed others" ("We-Man" 190). Regardless of the actions that Zahra takes throughout the course of her life, she consistently fails to engage in any kind of healthy sharing of selves, and as such, she is unable to heal the wounds of her childhood or the wounds of the war.

### **Lebanon in Fragments**

In order to contextualize Zahra's identity crisis both before and during the war, we must examine the history of constructions of identity and belonging in Lebanon. It is neither necessary nor feasible in a study of this scope to enumerate every faction and dispute in the war and its preceding years; rather, the goal of this section is to give the reader a sense of the roots and scope of the fragmentation of Lebanese society and the effects of that fragmentation on Lebanese citizens both before and during the war.

As Hiro notes above, Lebanon's history and geography made it a suitable location for the settlement of a variety of peoples who had been outsiders in their native lands. Long before the drawing of the borders of the modern Lebanese republic, then, the region was settled by groups who had been expelled from their homelands and who were ill-

suited to form a united nation. Indeed, to even speak of the Lebanese nation as such is problematic, as the nation now known as Lebanon is largely a twentieth-century construction, formed from lands that were once loosely unified under the Roman empire and later under the Ottoman empire. According to Hiro, the Ottoman Emirate of Mount Lebanon, established by Fakhr al Din Maan (1591-1633) was “regarded by many historians as the precursor of the modern state of Lebanon” (2). However, this region, though under Sunni Ottoman rule, was largely populated by Maronite Christians with ties to Europe. Hiro explains that “Maronites improved their status... in 1648, when the Ottoman emperor accepted France as their protector in his domain. Maronite links with France flourished and the community thrived” (2). This divide was compounded by the southward migration of the Maronites, as Hiro notes: “Whatever the cause of this demographic movement, it sowed the seeds of an intractable confessional conflict, which has since then erupted in ever-rising proportions, engulfing such other sects as Shias, Greek Orthodox and Sunnis, who found themselves ruled by Druze or Maronite governors as they expanded their respective domains” (2). This chaotic mix of populations sowed the seeds for the fragmented society that would later become the Republic of Lebanon. Indeed, as different foreign powers began to exert their influence over Lebanon, these different faith communities found themselves split from within and pushed into alliances with other groups based on foreign allegiances. Hiro describes this process during the period of the French mandate:

The inter-war period was marked by animosity between the French-backed Maronites on one side and an alliance of Sunnis and Greek Orthodox Christians on the other. With their patriarch based in Damascus, Greek Orthodox Christians had a long history of harmonious relations with their Muslim rulers. They now allied with Sunnis in their opposition to the Maronite plans to create a Western-oriented state in an independent



Lebanon, and sought the merger of their country with an adjoining Syria. In this conflict France played the role of a biased mediator. (4)

Thus we can see that, on the eve of the creation of the independent Lebanese republic, the people of the region were divided on several different axes: they were split into faith communities—Christian and Muslim—which were in turn divided from within, and they were also divided in their loyalties toward foreign powers that wished to determine the politics of the nascent Lebanese state. In this chaotic environment, there was no basis upon which to found a national identity; the Lebanese people were united by geography and little else.

Throughout various stages of the pre-Republic history of Lebanon, religious identity has been intimately tied to political identities (a system that was aided and abetted by various foreign powers), and after the establishment of the Lebanese republic, this conflation of religious and political identities was codified into law in what is known as the “confessional” system. Edgar O’Ballance describes the constitution (or “National Pact”) of 1943, drafted by the French government:

[P]olitical power was shared between Christian and Muslim sects on a ratio of six to 5, based on a census of 1932 that showed Christians to be in a slight majority. The president was to be a Maronite Christian and the National Assembly speaker a Shia Muslim. The president would nominate the prime minister, and all government, administration, civil service, and army appointments were to be on a ‘confessional’ basis, an expression that became commonplace in Lebanon, meaning based on the assumed numerical strength of the various sects. (viii)

The National Pact created a power-sharing system based on data that were already eleven years old at the time when the pact was adopted, and it guaranteed a Christian majority in the Lebanese government—as well as in all civil service positions—regardless of changes in the nation’s demographics. The National Pact also had the effect of cementing

the already complex politicization of religious identity in Lebanon. Moreover, the confessional system had become blatantly unfair by 1969, when, as O'Ballance notes, the higher birthrates amongst Muslims had resulted in a reversal of the proportions measured in the 1932 census (ix). Now that the Lebanese constitution was effectively codifying inequality, the disunity of Lebanese society grew even stronger.

During the war, the fragmentation took on a physical dimension, with the city of Beirut as the most striking example of this division. Lamia Rustum Shehadeh describes this division and its causes:

By the end of the 1975-76 war Beirut was partitioned into East (mainly Christian) and West (mainly Muslim and the PRM [Palestinian Resistance Movement]), symbolizing the schism and divisiveness that came to afflict Lebanese society for another fifteen years. During and immediately after the war, each of the two camps made efforts to consolidate its territory. Thus Beirut lost its unity as an urban center and communications between the two sectors became rather difficult, despite the five main crossing-points, as they were severely restricted by sniper fire. This, plus the government's slow and hesitant resumption of its power and sovereignty, led to the establishment of three "proto-states" in the different sectors: the Christian, the Druze, and the Palestinian. (18)

With Beirut divided into mini-states with almost impenetrable frontiers, the already-insular communities that made up the Lebanese state became even more isolated, and intimate selving across ethnic and religious lines became more of a challenge. Even within communities, the presence of snipers throughout the city encouraged an insular lifestyle, thus significantly diminishing the social interaction that is necessary for intimate selving.

Besides the presence of mini-states within Lebanon, the country was fragmented by the presence of foreign powers. Although Lebanon had been controlled from the outside by foreign governments throughout its history, by 1982 all pretenses had been

dropped, and several foreign armies had physically occupied the country. Shehadeh enumerates the various forces that controlled Lebanon, including Syria (which controlled two-thirds of the country), the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and the Israeli army; the only major Lebanese force to control any part of the country was the Lebanese Front, which controlled the Christian enclave (19). In the absence of anything resembling a stable Lebanese government, nor of a unified Lebanese society, a sense of collective self became virtually unattainable.

Indeed, the fragmentation of Lebanese society was not only political; it was also divided socially. As David Gilmour notes, the family unit was by far the most important social unit in pre-war Lebanon, and social interactions were ruled by parental authority. He explains: “Lebanese life revolved around the family and strict parental authority was still the rule in most communities. Even in fashionable circles marriages were often arranged and it might be impossible to take a girl out to dinner without a formal introduction to her parents and their subsequent approval” (13). With such strict controls over social interactions, intimate selving is restricted to a relatively small circle, subject to the whims of one’s parents. Moreover, given the absence of civil marriage in Lebanon, interfaith marriages were (and indeed, still are) virtually impossible (Gilmour 13), thus making intimate selving an even more insular process. Moreover, the family, rather than the state, was the provider of social services for many Lebanese. Gilmour explains: “If somewhere in the family there happened to be a doctor or a lawyer, this would open up services to many people who otherwise might be unable to afford them. Perhaps the most influential role played by the family, however, was as a provider of employment, for a

large majority of businesses, great and small, were family firms” (14-15). As the family dominated the social, political, and economic lives of Lebanese citizens, the role of the nation was comparatively slight, and loyalty to the family unit superseded loyalty to the state. A person without strong family ties could easily find him/herself with no social network or support system.

The war damaged such social support systems not only by creating physical barriers within Lebanon, but also by forcing a large number of Lebanese to migrate within Lebanon to safer regions or to emigrate to other countries. Shehadeh enumerates the forms of migration that took place as a result of the war:

Seven hundred thousand are estimated to have had to flee their homes at least once. Most have not yet returned [as of 1999]. It is estimated that about one-quarter of the population emigrated to safer areas and countries. Most of these were skilled workers (industry, construction, hotel, business), doctors, engineers, architects, and financiers. Many firms transferred their activities abroad. (23)

In a country where local communities were once of utmost importance, the uprooting and displacement of such a large portion of the population creates immense damage to one's sense of belonging and one's sense of home. With communities broken apart and spread out both in Lebanon and abroad, the process of intimate selving became severely disrupted. Moreover, the people who left were largely the people who provided necessary employment and social services for their families and local communities, thus leaving many poor Lebanese with no social net whatsoever.

Nonetheless, Shehadeh argues that the Lebanese people were very resilient and learned to cope with the difficulties of war, particularly in the development of a new wartime economy. The Lebanese people, she observes, “soon learned to develop a flexible war economy: whenever possible, damage was immediately repaired and houses

rebuilt; new factories sprouted in relatively safer areas; and banks, food caterers, supermarkets, and shopping centers were decentralized as provincial towns developed into business centers” (25). To the degree that they were able to do so, the Lebanese people responded to the destruction of their communities by rebuilding them. They coped with the physical fragmentation of their country by forming microcosms in their individual towns and cities. Indeed, this process of re-formation of community mirrors the process of re-formation of relational bonds as seen in Djébar: just as the women of Algiers coped with their sense of isolation by opening themselves to a new community of independent women and by re-forging lost friendships, the people of Lebanon coped with the fracturing of their nation by creating new communities within their enclaves and by re-building the structures and institutions that helped those communities survive.

Likewise, the situation for women in Lebanon was precarious both before and during the war, but the war prompted organization and action on the part of women, and they were able to improve their situation in post-war Lebanon. Shehadeh describes the situation of women both before and during the war succinctly:

[W]omen in Lebanon, before the war, were mostly regarded as inferior to men in all respects—prowess, capabilities, education, work opportunities, and dependability. Yet, they embodied the so-called “family honor.” Accordingly, they were to be protected and cared for, but excluded from decision-making positions. This explains why they enjoyed more safety than men, allowing them to enter the public sphere with less tribulation: All factions avoided targeting or attacking women (except for indiscriminate shelling and occasional sniping); this is also why they were never allowed positions of leadership in the militias, or any other venue for that matter. (6)

This clearly demonstrates that, insofar as intimate selving is concerned, women in pre-war Lebanon were largely blocked from fully participating in such selving, for intimate selving is a non-hierarchical form of selving (*IS* 12) that does not deny the individual’s

agency (IS 2). Moreover, by using women as an avatar for family honor, the traditional Lebanese family structure leads the individual to be subsumed by the collective, which is an obstacle to true intimate selving (IS 11). However, much as the Algerian *porteuses de feu* took advantage of their veils in order to increase their mobility within a highly-policed city, the women of Lebanon took advantage of their symbolic status in order to overcome the fragmentation of Beirut, to cross the checkpoints and avoid the snipers. Such mobility may also provide the means for community-building and intimate selving amongst women from different quarters of Beirut.

Indeed, during the civil war, women began to expand their roles beyond those that had been considered appropriate for them in pre-war Lebanon, much as Algerian women had done during the Algerian Revolution. Mona Takieddine Amyuni enumerates these roles in her essay, “A Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975-1995”:

Bearers and carriers of a unique heritage, Lebanese women struggled during the long war to preserve a semblance of humanity in the midst of savagery. The majority of women, in fact, did not carry arms. Instead, they queued for bread, gas, gasoline, and water; they cooked, organized shelters, made provisions of candles, transistors, first aid medication, and were always ready to meet emergency situations. They were propelled to the foreground at home and outside. They took upon themselves domestic, economic, and social responsibilities, when men fought, went away, or simply died. (90)

The function of women during the war, simply stated, was to build communities. In the absence of state-organized social structures, women rebuilt the institutions that had been damaged by the war (or those that were essentially nonexistent before the war). In order to survive in the chaos of war, women needed to engage in intimate selving; that is, they needed to conceive of themselves as part of a connected network of selves, each of whom

depended on the other selves in the network—and on the network itself—in order to carry on.

Unlike the Algerian women who participated in the revolution, however, Lebanese women's war experience has led to some lasting changes in the status of Lebanese women. Shehadeh attributes this change in women's status in part to the politicization of women during and after the war:

[W]ar, entering the homes, politicized the daily lives of women and forced them out into the public arena to meet new situations, armed only with antiquated traditional skills and patterns that they skillfully used to help their families remain afloat. The roles of mother and housewife acquired a new political dimension, whether on the individual or the collective levels... The war, thus, raised the social awareness of women and made them conscious of the importance of their role in developing a dynamic civic society for the purpose of advancement and development. This led not only to an increase in governmental organizations, but an increase in the rate of women's participation in such organizations. (325)

Shehadeh discusses women's changed status in terms of social roles, but these changes can also be couched in terms of a changed process of selving. The ways in which women form a sense of maternal selfhood, for example, has changed since the war. Rather than seeing herself as subservient to her husband, for example, a postwar Lebanese woman may come to engage in true, nonhierarchical intimate selving with her husband and children. Rather than allowing the mother to serve as the embodiment of family honor, the responsibility for family honor would ideally be shared among all members of the family. Moreover, with the expanded social roles of women, the circles within which women engage in intimate selving become larger. Whereas selving in the pre-war era centered around the family, the postwar self is based not only on familial relations, but also on community relations extending even to the national level. This transition has not been a complete one; Shehadeh observes that "[a]lthough today women are found in large

numbers in all domains, they are virtually non-existent in decision-making positions, which are still [in 1999] dominated by men” (327). However, women’s economic and political powers are significantly improved compared with the beginning of the war, and profound changes are taking place in Lebanese society regarding the status of women.

The political and social situation of Lebanon, then, is almost the opposite of that of Algeria. Rather than suffering from a single colonial oppressor, Lebanon was torn not only between various ethnic and religious groups within its borders but also between several foreign powers struggling for influence over Lebanon. Although Lebanese women, like their Algerian counterparts, played a significant role in the war, Lebanese women found their situation somewhat improved by their participation, whereas Algerian women were disappointed to find that their efforts in favor of an independent Algeria were not rewarded. Although the Algerian Revolution left women frustrated and voiceless, the Lebanese civil war mobilized women and helped them discover a political voice that was not present in the pre-war era. Although the war resulted from the fragmentation of the country, the end result was the unification of Lebanese women in an effort for survival and advancement of women’s rights. This change in status was also accompanied by a shift in patterns of selving: women’s roles within the family expanded in such a way as to place more emphasis on women’s agency, and family structures grew less hierarchical. Through their increased political voice, women came to perceive themselves as part of a larger national community, as opposed to the close-knit family-based communities that dominated pre-war Lebanon.



### **Failed Selving in *The Story of Zahra***

In order to address cooke's argument that Zahra experiences a form of healing as a result of the war, we must compare her selving processes both before and during the war. A healing process, as I define it for the purposes of this study, would consist of a shift from an unhealthy form of selving—one in which Zahra is dominated by others, one in which she lacks autonomy, or in which Zahra is unable to form relational bonds with others—to a process of true intimate selving, in which Zahra is able to relate to others as equals, in which she maintains autonomy, and in which she views herself as embedded within a network of selves.

### **Before the War**

Al-Shaykh's fiction is populated by characters who find themselves unable to relate to other people or to the world around them. Although he does not speak of intimate selving as such, Charles Larson recognizes the problem of women's selving in her wartime writings. In his article "The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist," Larson describes the typical situation of women in al-Shaykh's fiction:

Perhaps the metaphor that best typifies the conflict between the male and female worlds in Al-Shaykh's writing is the unknowable. Too many of her male characters act as predators, stalking women because they know little about them: sexually, emotionally, mentally. Others merely endure the situation in which they find themselves, demonstrating little or no curiosity about the opposite sex. (14)

Al-Shaykh's characters have no knowledge of the people around them, even those who are closest to them. Larson uses the example of al-Shaykh's short story "The Unseeing Eye," in which an old man cannot even remember whether his wife of some thirty or forty years has one eye or two. This lack of knowledge of other human beings is a

constant obstacle in al-Shaykh's fiction; characters find themselves surrounded by people whom they never truly know, and as a result, they are unable to understand their own selves or their place in the world. This lack of knowledge leads to a fractured, fragmented world, not unlike the divided Lebanon that al-Shaykh knew.

This is very much the case with the titular protagonist of *The Story of Zahra*. Just as the problems that led to the Lebanese civil war began long before 1975, the seeds of Zahra's troubled adulthood were clearly sown during her equally problematic childhood. The opening chapter of the novel gives the reader a portrait of a childhood marked by neglect, exploitation, and self-destructive behaviors. The very first memory that Zahra shares with the reader demonstrates her ambivalent relationship with her mother. She recalls:

We stood trembling behind the door. I was aware that my heartbeats mingled with the pulse in her hand as it stayed firmly pressed to my mouth. Her hand smelled of soap and onions. I wished she would keep it there for ever. The hand was plump and warm. We hid in the darkness behind a door slightly ajar. Sounds of footsteps and loud noises drew nearer, before the door fully opened and light streamed into the room. Instinctively we glued ourselves to the wall behind the door and a current of fear ran through us as if we were wired together.<sup>61</sup> (3)

There appears to be an intimate bond between Zahra and her mother here: Zahra speaks in the first person plural, and she notes the shared emotions between her and her mother. However, they are connected through fear rather than through a more positive form of emotion. Even the mother's gesture of covering Zahra's mouth—a gesture that Zahra wishes would last forever—is based on fear; it is not intended to comfort, and the fact that Zahra finds it comforting suggests that she has little experience with truly loving gestures. The process of selving is thus a toxic one for Zahra, not the nurturing and

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<sup>61</sup> To simplify formatting, I have used the English translation rather than the original Arabic text.

healing experience as seen in “Women of Algiers in their Apartment.” While cooke refers to Zahra’s relationship with her mother as “an obsessive attachment” that “border[s] on an unhealthy voyeurism” (*WOF* 50), it is not only the uneven sharing of sentiment that makes the bond between the two women unhealthy. The problem with the mother-daughter-relationship, Evelyne Accad argues, is that it fails to serve as a model for healthy community-building. Accad explains that Zahra’s “sense of community and closeness to her mother does not... give her a sense of solidarity with other women, perhaps because her feelings are so contradictory” (*Sexuality* 45-6). Zahra’s obsession with her mother is fueled not by love, but by fear of abandonment, and this fear is exacerbated each time she accompanies her mother on one of her romantic trysts. With such an unstable basis upon which to base her process of intimate selving, Zahra’s sense of self becomes fragile and rootless. Indeed, upon witnessing the end of one of her mother’s sexual escapades, Zahra thinks to herself, “...how I hated them at that moment! They embarrassed me, made me feel unsure of myself, alone” (12). This sense of solitude comes from her inability to form consistent and mutual relational bonds with her mother; any bonds that do exist are easily strained by bonds that the mother forms with men.

It is not only with her mother, however, that Zahra forms unequal familial bonds. Zahra describes a typical dinner scene in which her mother distributes *melokhia* to the various members of the family. Zahra and her mother would eat their own meals separately, and neither was ever given any chicken in their portions of the stew. The meat was reserved for Zahra’s brother Ahmad and occasionally her father. Zahra recalls:

Every day, as we sat in the kitchen to eat, [my mother’s] love would be declared: having filled my plate with soup she serves my brother Ahmad, taking all her time, searching carefully for the best pieces of meat. She

dips the ladle into the pot and salvages meat fragments. There they go into Ahmad's dish. There they sit in Ahmad's belly. (11)

This unequal distribution of food is an excellent everyday example of the hierarchical selving that takes place in Zahra's family. In her description of intimate selving, Joseph insists that "[c]onnectivity necessitates neither inequality in general (hierarchy) nor the subordination of women and juniors in particular (patriarchy)" (12). In Zahra's family, however, individual identities are subjected to patriarchal social structures; despite the fact that he contributes almost nothing to the family, Ahmad is accorded the highest status as demonstrated by the food distribution. Moreover, in Zahra's view, equating food to love, Ahmad is the most worthy of love, while she and her mother deserve only residual affection. Moreover, if true intimate selving is "neither individualist nor corporatist" (*IS* 11), then the selving that takes place in Zahra's family must be labeled as unhealthy, for the needs of the many are subjugated by the needs of the individual.

This sense of inequality and worthlessness leads to self-destructive behavior.

When Zahra's father confronts his wife about her infidelity and begins to beat her, Zahra responds by hurting herself. She describes the scene:

Seeing the blood covering her face, I tore at my hair and beat my chest, exactly as she would do herself. Then I stood on a chair and, reaching for the window, pushed aside the still-fresh orange peels laid there to dry. I meant to cry for help to our neighbor Issa, but my father, thinking I was about to jump out the window, let my mother go and threw himself at me. At that moment, I really did want to jump for fear of him... (15-16)

The only way that Zahra knows to relate to her mother during this frightening and dangerous event is through mimicking her self-destructive behavior. Rather than intervening in the physical conflict, Zahra hurts herself. Even her attempt to call for help is mingled with suicidal desires. In the absence of a sense of belonging, Zahra has no

means of relating to her family except through self-harm. For cooke, this is typical of the roles assigned to Lebanese women at this time: she argues that “[t]he writings of the Beirut Decentrists expose the dangers inherent in women’s socialized maternal ‘instinct’ for protection of others that may involve self-sacrifice” (“~~W~~o-man” 188). Indeed, Zahra’s model of maternal behavior is one of self-destruction in the sense that Zahra’s mother engages in behavior that leads to unhealthy selving; she forms relationships in which she, as a woman, is subservient and must sacrifice her happiness and well-being for the comfort of others. Zahra, upon witnessing her father’s abuse of her mother, engages in self-harm in a perverse attempt to relate to her mother. The only way Zahra knows to engage in selving with her mother is through destruction of the self.

Another self-destructive habit that is described at several points in the novel is Zahra’s frequent retreats to the bathroom, where she picks her pimples. cooke describes these retreats as healthy, declaring that Zahra’s “repeated escapes to the bathroom, a place of cleansing, allow her the space and privacy to pull herself together” (“~~W~~o-man” 189). While these retreats do allow Zahra to escape from the abuse of her family, they do not allow her to escape from her self-abuse. Zahra’s self-imposed isolation prevents her from social interactions necessary for intimate selving, but this is not the only damage that she does to her self in the bathroom. Her pimple-picking is also an obstacle to romantic relationships, as her father notes. Though he encourages Zahra to marry her brother’s friend Samir, he makes it clear that she is not a desirable wife, for he asks her “‘I only wish to know why on earth Samir wants to marry you? What does he see in you? You, with your drawn cheeks and pimples, pock-marked face?’” (29). Although it may not be her conscious goal to distance herself from others by scarring her face, her self-

destructive behavior does reflect an inability to cope with the abusive relationships in her life. Zahra's retreats into the bathroom may provide temporary refuge, they do not, as cooke asserts, allow her to heal.

During the pre-war period, Zahra experiences other toxic relationships—particularly with her uncle Hashem and her husband Majed—but an analysis of these relationships would add little to this study. For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficiently clear that for Zahra, the pre-war period is marked by unhealthy relational bonds and an inability to engage in true intimate selving. Zahra's family is structured in a way that prohibits her from relating to her father and brother in a non-hierarchical manner or from exercising any kind of agency, and her behavior is self-destructive both physically and psychologically. If cooke's assertions are true, and the civil war provides Zahra with an environment in which she is able to heal herself, then the civil war period will see a change in Zahra's manner of selving, and Zahra will begin to form relational bonds that are mutual, dynamic, and non-hierarchical.

#### *During the War*

The second part of the novel, set in an unnamed period during the early years of the civil war (sometime between 1975 and 1980, when the novel was published), begins on a familiar note. As Zahra watches the news, she hears the newscaster repeat the phrase "We are with you." Her response to this expression of solidarity is the same as her response to abuse: "As he said it again and again, my hand automatically went to my face and I started to pick at my pimples..." (123). Zahra recognizes that the abusive bonds that form her family unit are reflected in the hostile relations between the different factions of Lebanese society. For cooke, this congruence of Zahra's internal and external realities

provides an opportunity for healing; she argues: “Although Zahra remains other than people consider women should be, she is no longer in conflict with her environment and therefore with herself... Unlike prewar society, this context does not alienate, and Zahra can structure herself in harmony with it” (We-Man 189). It is true that Zahra finds herself in harmony with the rest of society for the first time in her life; her own self-destructive behavior can hardly be considered abnormal when her entire country is in the process of self-destruction. Likewise, the hostility amongst the members of her family is now entirely consistent with the hostility that characterizes Lebanese society. However, cooke’s argument is predicated on the conflation of normalcy and health. If cooke’s argument is true, then the definition of a healthy self is contingent upon the social context. However, if we define the healthy self in terms of intimate selving, then Zahra continues to display unhealthy behavior during the period of the civil war. She responds to her familial conflicts and her national conflict in the same way: by withdrawing from others and harming herself.

In fact, Zahra recognizes her solitude and indifference as a form of sickness. She thinks to herself:

The idea of my marrying again was buried deep by the thunder and lightning of the rockets. But it was all sick thinking, I would tell myself. My deep sleeping was a sickness, my devouring huge quantities of food was a sickness, my increasing weight, my wearing only my housecoat for two months on end were sicknesses. My silence was a sickness... My indifference to [my mother’s] anxieties, especially when she tried to get out of me my real reason for divorcing Majed, was also a sickness. (125-6)

This behavior, while considered unhealthy during the pre-war period, takes on a new meaning in the wartime context. At this point in the war, withdrawal and solitude are the norm; indeed, the newscaster repeatedly encourages people to stay home for their own

safety. By cooke's logic, Zahra's behavior should be considered both normal and healthy. However, Zahra recognizes that it is neither normal nor healthy; her withdrawal, as well as that of Lebanese people in general, is the result of an exceptional situation caused by the violence of the war. It is particularly notable that many of the sick behaviors that Zahra enumerates are related to intimate selving. She uses the war as an excuse for putting off thoughts of marriage, but she realizes that it is unhealthy for her to respond to violence by avoiding intimate relationships with other people. Likewise, her mother's anxieties should have an impact on Zahra; intimate selving is based on relationships in which people react to shifts in the other (*IS* 2). By ignoring her mother's worries, Zahra is exhibiting unhealthy behavior. While it is important that Zahra recognizes her sickness, she does not change her behavior. The thought of a cease-fire terrifies her; as soon as one is declared, she panics because it "meant having to leave the house. It meant going outside, and seeing people, and they seeing me for what I was" (127). The war is not a means of healing for Zahra, for once the violence stops—even temporarily—she is unable to engage in the process of sharing her self with others.

Early in the war, however, both Zahra and her parents change. They become more aware of each other and of their relationship to the people around them. Zahra recalls:

Those days drew me closer to my mother and father, who seemed to realize, for the first time, that I was not a specter. I began to follow the news of the war, reading nervously but eagerly between the lines in the newspapers, searching for the truth... Had George, the hair-dresser, our neighbor, turned against me? Had I turned against him? (129)

Zahra no longer exhibits the "obsessive relationship" with her mother (*WOV* 50), perhaps because she no longer needs to compete with strange men for her mother's attention.

Likewise, her father shows concern for her, rather than heaping abuse upon her and her



mother. Due to the violence of the war, all three members of Zahra's family (Ahmad is absent, as he has joined a militia) have experienced changes in the self, which in turn change the way in which they relate to each other (*IS* 2). This shift in identity may be due in part to a shared enemy. Amin Maalouf argues that "The identity a person lays claim to is often based, in reverse, on that of his enemy" (14). Before the war, the various members of Zahra's family treated each other with enmity; with their shared fear of snipers and militias, the family has found a common enemy and therefore a common identity. This is illustrated in Zahra's queries about her neighbor George; by wondering about her potential enmity with him, Zahra places herself within the network of conflicting identities that underlies the war. Indeed, her relationship with George resembles intimate selving in many ways—Zahra recognizes herself as part of a network that includes George, and she recognizes their influence upon each other as mutual and reactive. However, because the relationship is based on perceived hostility, it cannot be described as true intimate selving.

It is there that Zahra's changes become problematic. Connectivity based on hostility cannot lead to healing, for such relationships do not result in agency for all parties involved. Indeed, Zahra finds herself in an environment in which each party is dedicated to subverting the agency of anyone who is perceived as an enemy. Evelyne Accad is thus justified in arguing that Zahra experiences "an illusory, temporary freedom that masks the deeper problems of a society unable to solve its conflicts except through violence and death" (*Sexuality* 45). The bonds that she feels with her family during this time of violence are not based on mutual love and respect, but rather on a shared sense of fear and a common enemy. As Maalouf argues, "People often see themselves in terms of

whichever one of their allegiances is most under attack” (26). Zahra’s family does not experience a shift in identity in reaction to shifts in each other’s selves, but rather in reaction to an attack upon the already fragile unity of the collective. As such, the sudden family unity cannot be attributed to intimate selving so much as to fear. Indeed, this new family dynamic closely resembles Zahra’s childhood obsession with her mother, in which she clung to her mother less out of love than out of need of protection. The war has not fundamentally changed the way in which the family members relate to each other. Rather, it has merely intensified pre-existing unhealthy bonds.

Superficially, it appears that Zahra is more able to experience empathy outside of her family than within the family. Around the time of the sniper’s arrival, Zahra briefly volunteers at a hospital. Accad notes that this is an important development, as it marks the first time that “Zahra starts thinking of someone other than herself” (*Sexuality* 50). However, her own discomfort with the sights and smells of suffering take precedence over her desire to help others. Despite her good intentions, Zahra finds herself unable to transform desire into action. Cooke argues that passivity is Zahra’s way of expressing her awareness of the war (*WOV* 55), but this also means that Zahra has no agency. If agency is a necessary element of intimate selving (*IS* 2), then Zahra’s inability to relate to others in an active manner cannot be considered healthy.

Even more troubling is cooke’s contention that Zahra’s relationship with the sniper constitutes a form of healing. By allowing the sniper to rape her, cooke argues, Zahra ends her withdrawal and finally embraces the reality of the war. She interprets this embrace as a means of ending the violence: “Al-Shaikh intimates that the only chance of ending the war was to think not in terms of its end, but of its present. That which is not

seen to exist cannot be ended” (WOV 56). That is, by subjecting herself to the violence of the war, Zahra has allowed herself to stop pretending that the violence and the war do not exist, and having acknowledged their existence, she can then work towards ending them. However, her acknowledgement of the war and its violence does not enable her to engage in healthy selving. Even Zahra recognizes that the relationship with the sniper is a toxic one. She wonders to herself:

However am I to describe that relationship? It began with me climbing the stairs to find him and feeling life start to revive in me... As I walked down the street, I was like one without a heart, for my heart had dropped again between my feet. I anticipated only one thing: hearing a bullet and then falling dead to the ground like the others the sniper had killed on the other side of the street... Nothing that was happening seemed real... (146-7)

Though Zahra does acknowledge the violence of war, she does not fully confront it, for it feels like a fantasy to her. Moreover, the relationships that she develops are marked by violence and hierarchy. Her relationship with the sniper makes her feel more alive only because this relationship brings with it the very real possibility of death. The sniper exercises power over her, and it is her powerlessness that makes her feel connected to him. The only sense of community that she feels is with the sniper’s dead victims. Acknowledging the violence of war in this manner does not promote healing nor the end of war as cooke proposes; rather, it perpetuates the power structures that create isolation and victimhood.

Zahra does attempt to engage in intimate selving with the sniper, but to no avail.

As she arrives for one of her regular visits, she thinks to herself:

I had been standing there petrified, but now all fear disappeared with the sound of his voice. Here was, after all, another human being, who had thoughts and asked questions. Who was Lebanese. Who knew where the Pigeon Rock—our lovers’ leap—stood. Who knew where the taxi stand was located. (148)

Zahra thinks about the ways in which she is connected to the sniper, but she never manages to go beyond the stage of thinking. She cannot express her connectedness to the sniper; in fact, she cannot so much as answer a simple yes or no question that he asks her.<sup>62</sup> When she has sex with him on this particular occasion, she is unusually aware of her discomfort, and moreover, she is aware of how unaware the sniper is of the pain that he inflicts on her. She reflects: “He did not seem to mind that he made my back and side hurt, and though I twisted around with discomfort, he paid no attention” (149).

Regardless of Zahra’s stated intentions, her visits to the sniper turn out to be yet another form of self-destructive behavior. Indeed. Accad compares these visits to Zahra’s retreats to the bathroom, noting that “[i]nstead of withdrawing in the bathroom to pinch her face, Zahra runs up to the roof and forgets everything through orgasms she reaches every afternoon in the sniper’s arms” (*Sexuality* 57). Much as she did during the pre-war era, Zahra escapes from hostile relationships by harming herself; the difference is that her self-destructive behavior during the period of the civil war takes the form of another harmful relationship rather than a solitary act of self-harm.

At the same time, however, sex with the sniper provides a sort of catharsis for Zahra. After the sniper first calls her by name, thus acknowledging her individuality, Zahra feels that the sex act buries<sup>63</sup> or purges<sup>64</sup> her past pains. Accad argues that the orgasm that Zahra experiences at this point allows her to forget her past traumas, but not without consequence:

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<sup>62</sup> “Did anyone see you come up here?” (148)

<sup>63</sup> “My cries became like lava or hot sand pouring from a volcano whose suffocating dust was burying my past life” (152).

<sup>64</sup> “My cries... contained all the pain and sickness from my past...” (153)

The sniper's caresses unwind all the suffering from her past. The orgasm brings to the surface all the feelings she had buried deep inside her; it intensifies them while allowing her to forget them... It is a kind of catharsis. She compares it to the electroshock treatment, and the image it conjures up is not positive, forewarning her of events to come, coloring Zahra's pleasure with the specter of madness and death. (*Sexuality* 55)

For Accad, the process of "unremembering," as discussed in the previous chapter, is not a means of creating a collective memory nor does it provide the impetus for social change; rather, it is a means for Zahra to purge her individual trauma. However, this expurgation is not associated with healing, but rather with a spiral towards death. The relationship with the sniper may offer Zahra sexual pleasure, but there is no intimate selving. Though Zahra believes that the sniper "understood [her] needs" (*Zahra* 152), she also makes it clear that the connection is physical, not psychic; after her orgasm, "[her] body had become a partner to his body" (154). Moreover, the relationship remains hierarchical, for Zahra refers to the sniper as "my lord and master a god of death who had succeeded in making my body tremble with ecstasy for the first time in thirty years" (154). Any sense of connection that exists between Zahra and the sniper is complicated by an ongoing power struggle, a struggle that recalls the familial abuse of power from Zahra's childhood. Though Zahra believes that she is moving on from her past, she is in fact caught in a cycle of abuse and madness that can only end with death.

The sniper's association with death becomes an obsession for Zahra, much like the obsession that she had with her mother as a child, and the relationship is no less toxic. cooke argues that "[a]s Zahra became familiar with the sniper, this anonymous personification of evil acquired a name, Sami, and a different identity... As the human was recognized the evil withdrew to a somewhere else [*sic*] where once again it defied explanation" (*WOV* 35). While the sniper certainly remains an enigmatic character, he is

hardly an innocent figure; indeed, Zahra's obsession with his evil side grows stronger after he brings her to orgasm. She recalls:

Every time I read about snipers in the news, the image of the sniper came back, prancing from one corner of the roof to the other like a hoopoe hunting for seeds, his binoculars dangling from his neck. He was no longer a fantasy. I tried to wipe the image clean and think how I should act. Should I throw a hand-grenade at him? Should I learn to use a gun and aim it at his heart?

I became obsessed by the sniper, obsessed with noting down the numbers of those killed by him. I began to hold myself responsible for their deaths. (156)

Rather than leading her to withdraw, the sniper's evil takes hold of Zahra, and she succumbs to his power. She loses her agency to the point where she is unable to move from thought to action, but she considers herself culpable for actions that she cannot control. As a child accompanying her mother on her adulterous trysts, cooke notes, Zahra "was instinctively troubled, and at the same time glad that her mother desired her presence" (*WOV* 50). Likewise, with the sniper, Zahra longs for his company at the same time that she reviles his actions. However, as with her mother, Zahra is not able to change the situation and is thus caught in a tug-of-war of control and obsession. There is no intimate selving in the relationship with the sniper. While he remains a bounded, autonomous self (*IS* 2), Zahra finds herself in a hierarchical relationship with the sniper (*IS* 12) in which she is deprived of agency (*IS* 2).

Zahra's pregnancy complicates her relationship with the sniper. As cooke observes, "[i]t was not motherhood that tempted her, but rather the hope of happiness with a man. Her focus was on Sami [the sniper], she felt obsessively attached to him, and he might, after all, marry her" (*WOV* 57-58). Her obsession with the sniper precludes any other form of relationality; when she first decides that she wants to marry him, she thinks

to herself, “I will not relinquish this relationship. Yet I can only go on living in this apartment so long as my parents stay down south and leave me to my own devices. I can never live with them again. I want to live alone with a man, to tend to his needs every night and morning—if he will marry me” (173). Zahra is willing to sever her existing relational bonds—toxic though they may be—in favor of an uncertain marriage with a man who is also an unhealthy presence in her life, and she views subservience as an ideal form of relationality. This obsessive need to please the sniper also precludes the possibility of having children with him. When the gynecologist informs her that she is four months pregnant, Zahra begs him to abort the fetus, then asks for poison to kill it, going so far as to make up lies about an impending divorce and then a dead husband in order to persuade him (193). When the doctor continues to rebuff her, she announces, “‘I’ll kill myself if I can’t get an abortion’” (194). As she has done throughout her life, Zahra believes that self-harm is the only way to cope with the uneven power structures of her relational bonds. Moreover, her desire to have an abortion is a reflection of her fear of intimacy and her desire for control. As cooke notes, for Zahra “[a]ll physical intimacy became a compounded violation. She could not control her passions because she had never had control of her body” (*WOF* 52). Zahra’s history of rape and physical abuse makes the idea of intimacy—both physical and emotional—painful for Zahra. By aborting her fetus, she feels that she can not only take control of her body, but also of her relationships. She wants the sniper to herself, and she cannot bear the thought of destroying her idealized relationship with a child. Zahra’s selving process has become problematic in a new way: for her, engaging in selving with the sniper precludes all other forms of relationality; her bond with the sniper has become exclusive. Although Joseph

does not discuss this particular issue in *Intimate Selving*, it clearly does not fall under her definition of healthy selving, for “[m]aturity is signaled in part by the successful enactment of a *myriad* of connective relationships” (*IS* 12, emphasis added). By forming an exclusive relationship, Zahra is blocking herself from fully engaging in the process of intimate selving and is thus limiting her potential to develop her self to its full potential.

As she walks home from the doctor’s office, Zahra comes to realize that her life is one long story of wasted potential, and her thoughts of suicide grow stronger; she no longer wishes to kill herself simply because she cannot get an abortion, but rather because she has failed to have any meaningful impact on the world or the people around her. She reasons to herself:

If I were to kill myself, then everyone would know I had been pregnant. But by the time they found out, I would be laid out for ever—I, and whoever was in my stomach, ready to travel underground into total silence. Above us, the noise, the din, and the fighting would continue between cease-fires. The conventions would continue, marriage would continue, giving birth would continue. And the houses, the rain and sun would all remain. Everything in turmoil; everyone inevitably moving towards the moment when they, too, must be laid out. All became equal in that moment. (199)

Accad portrays Zahra as a victim of her society, “a society that does not allow its individuals, let alone its women, to fulfill themselves...” (*Sexuality* 56). In her reflections on the transience and meaninglessness of her life, however, Zahra reveals an even more profound truth: Zahra is a victim of a so-called society that does not allow its people to fully engage in the process of intimate selving. Rather than creating selves that are “woven through intimate relationships that are lifelong, which transform over the course of personal and social history and which shape and are shaped by shifts and changes of the self” (*IS* 2), the people of wartime Lebanon are detached; they fail to make a lasting



impact on each other, and once they are dead they are quickly forgotten. The cycle of life and death continues, but the lives and deaths that take place in this environment have no meaning. In this respect, miriam cooke's observation about Zahra is partially on-target; she argues that "[a]lthough Zahra is transformed by her relationship with the war, her individual transformation has not transformed others... The only hope is the destruction of the previous ethos and the creation of a new one modeled according to transformed individual women like Zahra" (We-Man 190). It is correct that Zahra has not succeeded in transforming others as a result of any transformations that she experienced as a result of the war, and this fact makes her an unsuitable model for post-war healing. It is precisely her isolation and individuality that has prevented her from healing either herself or others. The model for healing must *not* be an "individual" woman like Zahra, but rather an embedded woman more like Djebbar's character Nfissa, or even women like Sarah, Anne, and Leila, who are able to overcome their isolation and thus engage in intimate selving. Zahra, however, is more like Nadjia, for she is unable to move beyond her own wounds and recognize her connections to others.

Zahra does briefly entertain the idea of opening up to the sniper in hopes that "his fear would disperse then and the problem be solved. Perhaps there would be no need for me to swallow those white pills after that" (204), but when the sniper insists that she have an abortion, immediately Zahra's "thoughts are channeled into one idea: a quick death from ingesting white pills" (206). Her relationship with the sniper cannot be sustained because they relate to others on such different terms. When the sniper finally offers to marry Zahra in order to calm her down, he seals her fate: he puts his hand on her belly and tells his as-yet hypothetical child "I hope, God willing, that you will be born to be a

fighter, surrounded by the noise of rockets and bazookas” (209). For Accad, this is a commentary on the sniper’s conflation of life and death: “How else could a killer conceive of life, except as a perpetuation of death? Can he really accept a woman as a life-giver and unite with her to create life? Is she not merely a vessel, like his country, into which he pours his violence, anger, and hatred?” (*Sexuality* 59-60). However, the sniper’s apostrophe is also troubling to Zahra because she realizes that her pregnancy makes her the site of the perpetuation of violence, for her child, if born into this violent context, would be “born to be a fighter” (209), immersed in the war from the time of birth. Just as her family reproduced structures of inequality and abuse, her nascent family will be the site of violence and death. At this point, Zahra does the unthinkable: she puts a name to the sniper’s violence by asking him outright if he is a sniper. The sniper reacts violently, denying the accusations and lamenting that “[p]eople now distrust their own mothers, their own fathers!” (210). The sniper’s denial is useless, of course; there is no denying the fact that he is an agent of destruction, no matter how much he tries to project his own divisive power onto Zahra. It is not Zahra who creates fear and distrust, but rather the sniper himself, and now that this truth has been acknowledged (if only by Zahra), there is no possibility of intimate selving. Zahra and the sniper cannot form a family, and Zahra and her fetus must therefore die. Accad observes that all of the characters in the novel “seek liberation through death” (*Sexuality* 54). Indeed, Zahra’s death does offer her freedom from the pain of solitude and violence. However, it does not offer healing, for the last image that Zahra describes before her eyes close forever is that of “rainbows processing towards [her] across the white skies with their promises only of

menace” (215). Death simply removes Zahra from an ongoing cycle of destruction, and, as she predicted, she is unable to have any lasting effect on her world.

### **Conclusion: Healing?**

cooke argues that “Zahra finds peace from within the logic of war” (*WOF* 50). If we approach Zahra’s psyche from the perspective of intimate selving, then cooke’s statement seems peculiar at best. The relationship that Zahra forms with the sniper is not substantially different from the relationships that she had formed before the war. As with her mother, she forms an obsessive relationship with the sniper that both limits her agency and places her in a position of inferiority and dependence with regards to the sniper. The imbalance of power in the relationship with the sniper causes her to engage in self-destructive behaviors not unlike the behaviors that she developed as a result of her father’s abuse.

As the war rages, cooke argues, Zahra “is no longer in conflict with her environment and therefore with herself” (“~~We~~-Man 189). In fact, this is not the case. Both before and during the war, Zahra is in an environment in which any attempt at intimate selving is blocked by fragmentation within communities. During her childhood, she experiences a family environment in which individuals exploit and abuse those who are weaker than they; during the war, she witness the same forms of abuse at the national and local levels. She remains in conflict with her environment, for she is still unable to construct a sense of an embedded self. She cuts herself off from her family and from the rest of the world in favor of an abusive relationship in which there is no love and no sharing, but rather a perpetuation of violence and abuse of power.

As with the case of Algeria, it is important to place Zahra's experiences within her specific cultural context. The conclusion (Chapter Five) will examine the social and political institutions that created the toxic environment that Zahra experienced, and I will compare that environment to the one experienced by both Djébar's characters and those of Linda Lê, the subject of the following chapter. As discussed at the end of the previous chapter, the analysis of Chapter Five will focus largely on the different lines of conflict in the three wars. While the selfing that takes place in Djébar's works is the result of a struggle against a single common oppressor, for example, the wounds that Zahra experiences can be attributed to a society that was fragmented as a result of multiple outside powers attempting to shape the Lebanese nation. Zahra thus finds herself trying to fit into an illusory sense of nationhood, whereas Djébar's characters were able to create a sense of collective self in opposition to their French oppressors (during the colonial era) or their male oppressors (during the postcolonial era). It is also notable that Algerian women's participation in the revolution took place in both the public and private spheres, whereas the women of Lebanon were largely confined to domestic spaces, in part due to the physical fragmentation of the city of Beirut. Chapter Four will begin with an examination of the ways in which the Indochina wars were similar to and different from the Algerian Revolution and the Lebanese Civil War.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Vietnamese Voices**

#### **Introduction**

Like the Lebanese civil war, the Indochina Wars of 1946-1975<sup>65</sup> can be traced to centuries of conflict that cross lines of ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and politics, and the conflict was greatly complicated by the involvement of numerous foreign powers. Indeed, it is difficult to characterize these wars; in some ways they were anticolonial revolutions, while in others they were civil wars, and they could also be considered neocolonial proxy wars that grew out of the Cold War. Martin Shipway describes the war as “seventeen years of colonial war for France,” and for Indochina it was “a thirty-year war of liberation from foreign domination and civil war” (1). Shawn McHale describes the conflict in the Mekong Delta as containing “mixed elements of ethnic conflict, civil war, religious contestation, brigandage, and foreign intervention” (115). Indeed, the same can be said of the entirety of Vietnam during the Indochina Wars.

Of the three wars covered by this study, the Indochina Wars have received by far the greatest amount of attention from historians and political scientists, particularly in English-language publications, and there is a staggering body of research about the political and military history of these wars. This chapter cannot even attempt to represent

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<sup>65</sup> This chapter will focus only on the first two wars, the First Indochina War (1946-1954), and the Second Indochina War, known in the U.S. as the Vietnam War (1955-1975). It will not go into great depth into the earlier conflicts with the British and the Japanese, nor will it focus on the Cambodian-Vietnamese War of 1975-1989, nor the Third Indochina War of 1979.

the complexity of these conflicts, nor would it be productive to focus extensively on the military and political strategies used by the various combatants. Rather, this chapter will examine the impact of the various forms of exile caused by the wars, as well as the wars' effects on issues of belonging and group coherence. This brief social history will be followed by an analysis of Vietnamese author Linda Lê's 1998 novel *Voix*, which follows the unraveling and temporary healing of a woman who is living in exile, presumably as a result of the Indochina wars. In my analysis of this novel, I will examine the narrator's inability to relate to those around her, her paranoia and delusions, and her troubled relationship to her past and to her homeland in order to understand what bonds were destroyed by the war and her exile and how she attempts to cope with the destruction of those bonds. I will also examine the brief period of mental health that appears at the end of the novel (and thus immediately before her institutionalization) in order to understand how she is able to temporarily heal herself and also to understand why that healing is temporary.

*Voix* is a short novel narrated in the first person, consisting of a series of short episodes illustrating the evolution of the narrator's madness. It begins with the narrator observing her fellow patients in a mental hospital, which is actually chronologically the last episode of the story. This is followed by several episodes in which the narrator is fleeing from an unnamed "Organization" that she believes is persecuting her. Between these episodes of pursuit and escape, the narrator has visions of her dead father, sometimes unreachable, sometimes reproaching her for their failed relationship. Following this, the narrator has a vision of a return to her home country, which has been ravaged by the Organization. Following this vision, she visits a friend, whom she believes

has joined the Organization, then briefly finds refuge at her sister's house before fleeing once again. Finally she escapes to the mountains where she meets her father for the last time, finally laying him to rest.

I have chosen this novel because, like all of Lê's works, very little has been written about it.<sup>66</sup> Of all of her novels, *Calomnies* has been the most extensively studied, in part because it is the first of her works to be translated into English and is therefore more widely diffused than her other works.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, unlike many of Lê's novels, *Voix* actually offers the protagonist a chance at healing, something that is notable absent from *Calomnies*, *Lettre morte*, and others. Though the healing is temporary and imperfect, it does offer the reader a glimpse at how Lê would propose a solution to the wounds of war.

In my analysis of this novel, I will follow the evolution of the unraveling of the narrator's relational bonds. I will examine the specific difficulties that she has in relating with others, and I will identify the reasons for her inability to form relational bonds. In particular, I will identify the degree to which her paranoia and isolation can be attributed to the war, and specifically to the exile that she experienced as a result of the war. Finally, I will analyze the brief period of healing that she experiences at the end of the novel. I will determine the extent to which this healing is characterized by the formation of relational bonds, and I will identify the reasons for which this period of healing ends, and why the relational bonds formed during this period are not able to be maintained.

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<sup>66</sup> *Voix* is discussed in the following critical works: Bacholle-Bošković, *Linda Lê, L'écriture du manque*; Delvaux, "Linda Lê and the Prosthesis of Origin"; Ollier, "Consuming Culture"; Roberts, "A Vietnamese Voice in the Dark"

<sup>67</sup> Works covering *Calomnies* include: Bacholle-Bošković, *Linda Lê, L'écriture du manque*; Delvaux, "Linda Lê and the Prosthesis of Origin"; Motte, *Fables of the Novel*; Ollier, "Consuming Culture"; Winston, "Playing Hardball"; Yeager, "The Narrative Texts of Linda Lê. *Calomnies* was translated as *Slander* in 1996, and has also been translated into Dutch and Portuguese. Her only other work to be translated into English is *Les trois parques*, translated as *The Three Fates* in 2010.

## Voices of Exile

To date, very little has been written on Lê's works, and the scope of the published studies is fairly limited. By far the most common subject of these works is exile and loss. The only book-length study of Lê's work published to date, *Linda Lê, L'écriture du manque* by Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, focuses on Lê's obsession with absence, drawing many comparisons to the works of Marguerite Duras. In her introduction, Bacholle-Bošković cites a passage from Julia Kristeva: "'Il fallait, peut-être, l'aventure étrange du déracinement, une enfance sur le continent asiatique, la tension d'une existence ardue aux côtés de la mère [...] pour qu'une sensibilité personnelle à la douleur épouse avec autant d'avidité le drame de notre temps'" (1, Bacholle-Bošković's ellipsis).<sup>68</sup> She goes on to add: "Avec Marguerite Duras, tourmentée par cette 'maladie de douleur,' Linda Lê a en partage le déracinement, l'enfance asiatique, une relation débilitante avec la mère et bien sûr une prolificité et qualité littéraires qui font la grandeur d'un véritable écrivain" (1).<sup>69</sup> As with many other critics, Bacholle-Bošković emphasizes the autobiographical and autofictional aspects of Lê's works, exploring the ways in which the author's experience of loss, exile, and displacement inform both the content and the form of her work. She suggests that "[p]eut-être sa condition de 'métèque' explique-t-elle qu'elle fait figure de solitaire" (1),<sup>70</sup> and then she goes on to analyze the solitude of Lê's characters: "des

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<sup>68</sup> "We needed, perhaps, the strange adventure of uprootedness, a childhood on the Asiatic continent, the tension of an arduous existence on the coast of the sea (mother?) [...] in order that a personal sensitivity to pain should be tied with such avidity to the drama of our times." (All translations from this work are my own.)

<sup>69</sup> "With Marguerite Duras, tormented by this 'malady of pain,' Linda Lê shares uprootedness, an Asian childhood, a debilitating relationship with her mother, and of course a literary quality and prolificacy that make up the greatness of a true writer."

<sup>70</sup> "Perhaps her 'métèque' status explains why she is a solitary figure." For an explanation of the meaning and origin of the word "métèque," see Motte, p. 60.



personnages orphelins ou affectés par l'absence du double ou de l'être cher" (8).<sup>71</sup>

Though Bacholle-Bošković approaches the question of intimate selving here, the book as a whole places more emphasis on the author than on the characters. While she identifies the wounds of both the author and the characters, emphasizing the absence of relational bonds, she focuses primarily on the healing process of the author, rather than the characters. For example, in describing Lê's pain while writing *Les trois parques*, Bacholle-Bošković notes:

Avec l'impression d'avoir été abandonnée par les mots et leur pouvoir salvateur, elle fut submergée par une crise qui la mena au bord de la folie et ne retrouva sa propre voix et la parole que dans la parole désaxée d'autrui. Elle reconnut après coup combien cette crise lui fut salutaire et n'hésita pas à la comparer, toutes proportions gardées, à celle de Tolstoï.  
(8-9)<sup>72</sup>

Like many of the critics of Assia Djébar's work, Bacholle-Bošković examines the role that writing plays in the healing process, focusing on the writer's means of inserting her voice into a dialogue. In the case of Lê, this dialogue is not among a national group of women, but rather of a body of displaced people, those without a nation. However, as with the bulk of the criticism about Djébar's works, Bacholle-Bošković emphasizes the writer's healing *through* the creation of characters, rather than examining the characters' own healing processes.

Similarly, Emily Vaughan Roberts examines the evolution of Lê's struggle with her own exile over the course of her literary corpus. She defines the exile as "a displaced person, bereft of a clear sense of belonging, possessed by a profound sense of confusion

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<sup>71</sup> "orphan characters or characters affected by the absence of the double or of the dear one."

<sup>72</sup> "With the impression of having been abandoned by words and their saving power, she was submerged in a crisis that took her to the edge of insanity, and she only reclaimed her voice and her words in the offset words of others. She later realized how healing this crisis was and did not hesitate, keeping all things in proportion, to compare it to Tolstoy's."

and duality, in an ‘in-between’ position socially and culturally” (331). This definition of the exilic self certainly relates to the question of intimate selving; the exile finds herself in a liminal social position that inhibits the creation of relational bonds. However, Roberts is more interested in the narrative space of Lê’s novels than in the social space of her characters. She explains the thrust of her essay:

In Lê’s corpus, this condition [of exile] is mirrored in the creation of a narrative space that the exile occupies. Both this space and the condition of the exile, encompassed in this chapter by the term ‘the state of exile,’ are extended in significance beyond the compass of a literal consideration of the situation of the exile to act as a metaphor for the human condition. (331)

For Roberts, then, the exile is not an individual so much as a representative of the whole. This emphasis of the collective over the individual goes against Joseph’s construction of intimate selving (*IS* 11). When Roberts does discuss healing at an individual level, she, like Bacholle-Bošković, focuses on the writing process as a means of healing for Lê, without considering the healing process of the characters (though, admittedly, the characters are based on Lê). She observes that

Lê’s recent novels have hinted at a resolution of the problematic dialogic “state of the exile.” Almost against expectations, the evolution of the corpus leads to the state of the exile becoming a homeland in its own right, through her acceptance of her Vietnamese past, which, through a painful and dramatic process, comes to be integrated into her present rather than juxtaposed against it. (341)

According to Roberts, Lê creates a narrative space over the span of her corpus in which she resolves her own issues of exile. However, Roberts does not truly address healing within the diegesis of the novels.

Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier also discusses the ways in which Lê uses narrative space as a means of healing, but she focuses specifically on a kind of cultural

“cannibalism.” Comparing Linda Lê to both the titular cannibal of the short story “Vinh L” as well as to the plagiarist author (a cannibal of words and ideas) with whom Vinh corresponds, Ollier describes the paradox of the colonized writer:

[T]o exist, [the colonized] has to correspond to the image of the other, an alienating image formulated by the colonizer, which prevents access to the so-called authentic self, but outside of which he cannot survive... It is the round of cannibalistic metaphors: to disappear into the other and to contain the other within oneself... (246)

The act of writing in the idiom of the colonizer, according to Ollier, is a form of selving that Joseph would describe as unhealthy. It is one in which one self is subsumed by the other, in which one becomes stronger by destroying the other and at the same time incorporating the other into the self. While the act of cultural cannibalism, like true anthropophagy, may be a means of survival, it harms as well as heals and thus cannot be considered a form of intimate selving.

Similarly, Jack Yeager describes Lê’s writing as a form of alienation from Vietnamese culture as well as an attempt to reclaim a Vietnamese identity. In discussing the new wave of Vietnamese writers of French expression that emerged in the mid-1980’s, he argues that

Choosing to write in prose in Viet Nam meant turning one’s back on a deep cultural heritage that defined literature solely in terms of poetry. These novels carried within them constant reminders of their origins: writing in the language of the colonizer; rejection of one’s native traditions, culture, and language; betrayal of a homeland. (256)

By writing novels in French, Lê rejects an aspect of her “native” culture and replaces it with an aspect of the oppressor’s culture. Because the colonizer/colonized relationship is an inherently unequal one, this adoption of the French literary model places Lê in a position of hierarchical selving (*IS 12*), or selving based on unequal power dynamics.

However, Yeager also describes Lê's novel *Calomnies* as an "attempt to reclaim a stolen identity": "Lê seems both to force and to prevent an autobiographical reading of her novel. This concurrent creation and destruction exemplifies the position in which she finds herself: compelled to invent a new, composite identity, but with materials that bear the stigmata of the colonial past" (259). In her attempt to form a new identity and the relational bonds that come with that identity, Lê finds herself unable to separate herself from her colonized past, to sever the toxic bonds created by colonialism and war.

Building on both Yeager and Ollier, Jane Bradley Winston argues that later in Lê's corpus, writing is a representation of impossibility, of a "failed redemption;" the letters that cause the central anguish of *Lettre morte* "represent not communication or access to [the narrator's father], but now the irremediable impossibility of communication across diasporic borders" (194). The guilt of separation from her father (and from her homeland) has scarred the narrator to the point where she is unable to connect with even those who were once closest to her. These letters, "[w]ritten in a language she cannot decipher" (194) represent a source of alienation rather than of bonding. Likewise, Lê's writing also serves to alienate. Winston describes Lê's approach as "the creation of a narrative in which the writer and her readers are disoriented and destabilized" (195). Unlike Djébar's writing, which is a fairly straightforward attempt to insert the author into a narrative community, Winston argues that Lê attempts to insert herself into a literary tradition while simultaneously challenging it, "thus writing her place into what would seem to be the target of her own novelistic utterance's attack" (195). The goal of Lê's writing is not only to create tension between herself and her reader but also between herself and the community into which she is trying to insert herself. Her project is one of

creating anxiety and of forcing herself to remain at the margins, always between communities and never truly a part of any community.

For Warren Motte, this separation from the other is a means of protecting the self. In discussing the niece in *Calomnies*, he proposes that “power may appropriate the powerless in certain instances, and promote them in a carefully staged fashion... in order precisely to put the full pageant of power on public display. The niece may feel that the best defense against such a move is mobility itself, even if such a choice condemns one to a life in the margins of things” (59). Given the choice between a lack of relational bonds or toxic, hierarchical bonding, it seems that Lê chooses the former. However, he does not formulate marginalization or hybridity as a means of healing. The niece’s hybridity is a source of great anxiety, for “not only is she a *mètèque* in the eyes of others, she also feels herself to be a *mètèque* in her own blood” (61). The liminal position that the niece occupies places distance between herself and others, but it also makes it difficult to truly understand her own understanding of her self. The solution to the niece’s nomadism, Motte suggests, is language: “Learning to speak a language, learning to write a language, learning to turn that language to one’s most pressing needs may enable a person to establish a livable place for himself or herself in the interstices of power” (62). Like Roberts, Motte proposes a narrative space as a sort of refuge from the toxic selving that accompanies hierarchical power relations. Interestingly, though, he is more interested in the narrative space created by Lê’s character rather than the space created by Lê herself. However, the narrative space that Motte discusses is not a space that allows the writer to insert herself into a network of voices; writing is a solitary project for the niece, and it is analogous to her uncle’s madness. Motte argues that “if both madness and writing enable

to subject to construct his or her identity apart from the script that has been given to them by the group to recite, they both inevitably mark the subject as being outside the pale” (63). Though writing (and madness) can provide a means of resistance, as in the case of Zahra and her madness, neither writing nor madness offers a means of healing in *Calomnies*. This is particularly evident in the uncle’s fate at the end of the novel. Although, as Motte observes, “[t]he uncle views reading as something that allowed him to withstand his experience in the asylum, and indeed eventually enabled him to escape from it” (65), that escape does not constitute healing as defined in this study. Indeed, the uncle recognizes the written word as something that has terrible destructive capacity, and the letters that he exchanges with his niece force him to confront his own toxic relationships with his family. As a result, the novel ends with the uncle surrounding himself with books in the library of the asylum and setting both himself and the books on fire. In *Calomnies*, it seems that writing offers two options: escape from relationality (toxic or healthy), or a forced confrontation with the very relational bonds that the reader/writer wishes to avoid. In either case, the written word does not offer healing.

Marie-Magdeleine Chirol is more blunt; she refers to *Calomnies* as an “histoire de ruines” (story/history of ruins). She opens her article: “Auteur d’une douzaine d’ouvrages, parmi lesquels des romans, des nouvelles et des essais critiques, Linda Lê fait partie de ces âmes déracinées qui cherchent en vain dans le souvenir et l’écriture un passé marqué par le désastre et dont il ne reste tout au plus que des ruines”<sup>73</sup> (91). For Chirol, any attempt on Lê’s part to create a narrative space or to work through her traumatic memories would be in vain, for the past is destroyed. However, unlike the

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<sup>73</sup> “Author of a dozen works, including novels, short stories, and critical essays, Linda Lê is one of those uprooted souls who search in vain in memory and in writing for a past marked by disaster, of which nothing remains but ruins.” [All translations from this article are my own.]

aforementioned critics, Chirol does not believe that this is Lê's project. Rather, she argues that Lê "cherche moins à présenter un long développement composé de nombreux fragments que le lecteur devrait mettre en ordre, qu'une simple, courte et unique histoire, mais éclatée, répétée, démultipliée, mise en ruine"<sup>74</sup> (94). If healing is a process of forming binds, then for Chirol, Lê makes no attempt at healing in her literary project. Rather, her aim is to represent the wounds and the violence that she has experienced, to represent the ruptures and severances that result from war and exile.

Like Chirol, Tess Do focuses on violence rather than healing, though Do places emphasis on the toxic selving of incest as represented in *Les trois parques*. For Do, incest is a means of resistance, but not a healthy one. She explains:

On the one hand, being Vietnamese and knowing very well the implications of Confucian doctrine, these young immigrants openly challenge Vietnamese family hierarchies and the authority of their parents by breaking the incest taboo. On the other hand, by creating an exclusive bond with each other, be it emotionally, spiritually or sexually, solely based on their ethnic background, they withdraw into themselves and reject any integration into Western society. Incest, in this context, is not simply a theme that Lê exploits in her work but rather a figure that stands for the ambivalent feeling and desire of the young Vietnamese immigrants. No matter how lost they feel in the Western world, no matter how strongly they desire to return to the (Vietnamese) womb, these exiled characters soon realize the impossibility of their dream. (166)

The act of incest is at once a two-pronged rejection of relationality and also an attempt at a re-forging of a lost bond. The siblings reject the parental bond, which is unhealthy because it is hierarchical, and replace it with an incestuous bond, which is taboo in both Vietnamese and French culture, thus placing the siblings on the margins of both societies. At the same time, incest is an attempt to re-create the parental bond, as well as the bond of Vietnamese nationality, both of which have been permanently and irreversibly severed

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<sup>74</sup> "seeks less to present a long development composed of numerous fragments that the reader must put in order than a simple, short, unique story, but one that is exploded, repeated, multiplied, ruined."

by exile. As long as the incestuous bond remains in place, any truly healing bonds are necessarily blocked, thus preventing the siblings from healing the wounds of exile.

Martine Delvaux takes a different approach from most of the other critics, suggesting that the narrator's problem is her failure to recognize the healing potential of liminality for the exile. Like most of the other critics, Delvaux begins by exploring Lê's own relation to exile and writing, explaining:

Writing is the means to explore her displacement as an exiled subject, her link to Vietnam as an origin, both present and absent. Her homeland is lodged within her, a spectral presence that causes pain and alienation, as does her Vietnamese father's ghost, which inhabits her like a double.  
(201-202)

Once again, a narrative space is proposed as a means of healing the rift between the self and the home, but for Delvaux the problem is more complicated; the home is unattainable, so some sort of in-between space must be found in order to provide a new, hybrid home. The narrator of *Voix*, she argues, attains this goal by "inscribing herself within displacement rather than striving to find a fixed definition of herself" (206). However, it is clear that this tactic does not work, for we know from the beginning of the novel that the author's madness does not go away. Indeed, it becomes clear that her madness is linked to isolation and her failure to engage in intimate selving.

All of this scholarship still leaves a number of unanswered questions about Lê's works, including *Voix*. It is not the goal of this project to study Lê's works as autofiction, so the question of her authorial project is irrelevant at this time. However, the origins of her characters' wounds merit much further examination, particularly within the context of intimate selving. While exile in and of itself is certainly a source of anxiety for the narrator of *Voix*, that is not sufficient to explain her madness; it does not explain the



visions of her father nor her delusions about persecution at the hands of the Organization. Moreover, her temporary healing cannot be attributed to a narrative space, for, as I will discuss below, her writing has failed her by the point at which she lays her father to rest. Finally, we must understand exactly why her healing is temporary.

### **Exile from Indochina**

As with the Lebanese civil war, the history of the Indochina wars revolves around centuries of internal conflicts as well as a long history of colonialisms. The political and military histories of these wars have been extensively discussed by historians; this chapter will not go into detail about those histories. Rather, because *Voix* deals primarily with the violence of exile, this chapter will briefly examine the plight of the numerous Vietnamese people who were forced into exile by the Indochina wars. In the context of the present study, exile is a particularly important form of wartime violence, for, as Robin May Schott notes, exile is a particularly gendered form of violence: “The struggles of refugee women also attest to the significance of gender after women have left the field of war. Women and girls constitute 80 percent of the world’s refugee population” (24). Moreover, the act of uprooting a person is not the only form of violence associated with exile; Schott adds that “[w]omen refugees are frequently victims twice—during the violence and persecution in their home country, as well as during flight, in camps and settlements, and even in the process of integration into a new society” (24). Of the many forms of violence that the exile experiences, one of the most insidious is the violence directed at the self. Not only is the exile separated from her homeland, but she is forced to re-form her self within the context of her land of exile. In the case of the Vietnamese

exile in France, this means serving on the colonizer's terms, which can be particularly frustrating in the wake of an anti-colonial revolution. It is important to note that the exile experienced by refugees is different from that of the *pieds-noirs*, and for this reason it is important to understand the historical context and specificity of this form of exile.

However, the refugees who left the country were not the only ones who were uprooted; indeed, there were a great number of internally displaced persons during the course of the two wars. As David W. Elliott points out, it is difficult to estimate the degree to which Vietnamese people suffered from exile: "It was difficult to define 'refugee' in the fluid conditions of the time and, therefore, to count the number of refugees" (263). However, it is clear that the refugees suffered significantly from their condition. Heonik Kwon describes the conditions in one of the Vietnamese refugee camps:

Life in the refugee camps, where there was simply not enough food or space for [the refugees], was unbearable. A family of seven to nine would squeeze into a shack with a cement floor measuring three meters square under an unshaded tin roof. Amid the miserable and unsanitary living conditions, as widespread dysentery and other epidemics killed children and the weak, the village elders petitioned the Vietnamese authorities and the ROK combat authority to permit their return home. (*After the Massacre* 51)

It is evident from this description that exile meant not only the loss of home, but also a potential loss of life, or at least the infliction of serious illness and discomfort. Families that escaped together still ran the risk of losing each other to illness, starvation, or overheating. However, the physical risks were not the only dangers that refugees faced in the camps; agents from both North and South Vietnam actively used psychological warfare to control the refugees. Kwon elaborates:

Inside the refugee camps, there were South Vietnamese police informers as well as covert civilian agitprop activists loyal to the communist side. The former disseminated information about violent situations in the rural area and instigated fear; the Vietcong... activists fought this psychological war with counterinformation. Both forms of information were often exaggerated and unreliable. (*After the Massacre* 32)

Thus we can see that both sides exploited the vulnerability of the displaced peasants by sowing discord and uncertainty. Compounded with the harsh conditions and the loss of homes, this psychological warfare created tension that threatened the stability of the relational bonds that formed the basis of these rural communities.

As David Hunt notes, village or community ties were especially important for rural Vietnamese people:

As a man from Hoa Dinh declared, “farmers love to be with people from their own village.” On their own, they were cut off from the grapevine and from Front informational meetings and could not keep track of what was going on in the war. Gone also was a sense of closeness to others who shared their problems and joined together to find solutions. (141)

Even outside of the context of war, community ties are an important means of survival for the people of rural Vietnam. As Suad Joseph argues, this is an important aspect of intimate selving:

“In societies in which the family or community is as or more valued than the person, in which persons achieve meaning in the context of family or community and in which survival depends upon the integration into family or community, such relationality may support the production of what is locally recognized as healthy, responsible and mature persons.” (*IS* 9)

Given the centrality of kinship ties in Vietnamese society, intimate selving is necessary for survival, and the state of exile in which many rural Vietnamese found themselves during the war was a source of disruption, a force that broke these necessary bonds.

Indeed, as Hunt notes, it is not only the refugees who suffer from this disruption, but also the people who are left behind: “Villagers were unnerved when neighbors moved away

and were never seen again” (143). It is clear, then, that it is not merely the act of displacement that causes damage, but also the severing of community bonds. Though the refugees suffered more than those who were left behind, we cannot ignore the wounds inflicted on this latter group.

Finally, in order to truly understand the impact of exile on the Vietnamese people, particularly within the context of *Voix*, we must examine prevalent spiritual beliefs from that region. Kwon discusses the idea of displacement in the afterlife in terms of what the Vietnamese call “death in the street” versus “death in the home”:

The... condition of displaced afterlife, missing from one place and unknown in another place, is what the Vietnamese refer to with the concept “death in the street” (*chet duong*). This concept coexists with the opposite concept of “death in the house” or “death at home” (*chet nha*), and they together constitute a house-centered moral worldview that is manifested in the structure of Vietnamese domestic commemorative ritual... [T]he conceptual scheme relates to the contrast between “good death” and “bad death” presented in the sociological literature of death and death ritual. “To die a good death,” according to James Fox, “is to die in the house and home,” implying that the event of death takes place in the presence of kindred who will ritually appropriate the death to a benevolent ancestor. By contrast, the “bad death” is a sudden, violent death in a distant and unknown place away from home, which collapses the possibility of ritual appropriation and thus leads to “a condition of confusion and disorder but without the means for removing and resolving them.” (*Ghosts of War* 86)

In a culture that places strong emphasis on both home and family, death in the absence of loved ones or far from the familial hearth is a traumatic experience. However, it is not only the exile who is affected by the so-called “bad death;” as we will see in *Voix*, those who die at home, but in the absence of family, also find themselves dying without the appropriate end-of-life rituals. Even if we discount the spiritual and supernatural aspects of the Vietnamese death rituals, we must acknowledge that such a death must be anxiety-inducing for both the deceased and any exiled loved ones. Indeed, such anxiety is not

exclusive to Vietnamese society, for we see a parallel in Sarah's reaction to her mother's death in "Women of Algiers in their Apartment." The severing of relational bonds through death, without the possibility of closure (last words, a final goodbye, or even the presence of loved ones at the deceased person's bedside) can leave lasting scars on the surviving loved ones.

Clearly, exile is not the only form of violence inflicted upon people by the Indochina Wars, nor would I argue that it is the most important form overall. However, in order to fully understand Lê's works, it is important to treat exile as a form of violence rather than merely a form of displacement. As discussed in Chapter 2, we see that exile can cause severe psychic damage, particularly insofar as intimate selving is concerned. This chapter will examine the ways in which exile has wounded the narrator of Lê's novel *Voix* and the ways in which exile and its resultant anxieties disrupt the process of intimate selving.

### **Spectral Voices**

As with the majority of Lê's works, the violence of the Indochina wars primarily takes the form of exile and its attendant anxieties and severed relationality, and the wounds are manifested mainly as madness. The novel opens with a scene of artificiality, a sort of exile from reality: "Je suis assise sur le banc d'un long corridor éclairé par des néons. Je ne sais pas où je suis. Dans un centre de crise, comme on m'a dit, ou dans un théâtre avec des comédiens qui jouent leur partie et m'enrôlent en me laissant le choix

des répliques”<sup>75</sup> (7). Besides the harsh artificial lights, the setting is filled with falseness. The speaker doubts the existence of the crisis center, believing rather that the doctors, patients, and staff are actors playing rehearsed roles. Though they supposedly offer the “choice” of lines, it is clear that she is an outsider with limited or no agency. Her sense of alienation and distrust indicate that she is not part of this network of selves, and that she is not part of a “social [system] that value[s] linkage, bonding, and sociability” (IS 9). Because of this outsider status, her agency is also illusive; it may appear that she has the choice of lines, but the play is already written, and she does not know the plot. As Delvaux notes, “[t]he ‘lines’ that she chooses...are the words of others” (205). Moreover, real names are never revealed; rather, as the plot unfolds, the narrator refers to the other characters using names that sound like the names of extras in a film or a play: the lady in the blue robe, the woman in the hat, the Queen of Pain. None of these people are real; there is no relationality in this place. Her isolation recalls Sarah’s prison; indeed, the narrator quickly decides that “[o]n est en prison ici”<sup>76</sup> (7), a refrain that is repeated throughout the chapter by both the narrator and other characters. As with Sarah, it is unclear at the beginning how the narrator found herself in this asylum, for the first scene of the novel actually takes place at the end of the story, and clues about her madness are given only bit by bit, leaving the reader to piece them together; or, as Chirol argues (94), the story is intentionally fragmented, thus emphasizing the narrator’s alienation and also alienating the reader.

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<sup>75</sup> “I’m sitting on a bench in a long corridor lit by fluorescent lights. I don’t know where I am. In a crisis center, so I’ve been told, or in a theater with actors who play their role and who bring me into the play by letting me choose my lines.” [all translations from this work are my own.]

<sup>76</sup> “[w]e are in prison here”

It is, however, clear that the asylum is a place of solitude, and the patients desire intimate selving. The Queen of Pain, for example, seeks the attention of the male nurse: “[à] l’infirmier, habillé de bleu de la tête aux pieds, qui la retient, elle fait une scène de jalousie devant la porte vitrée au bout du corridor, Personne ne s’occupe de moi, j’ai mal, je suis à l’article de la mort et tout le monde s’en fout...”<sup>77</sup> (9-10). The woman is so damaged that she does not know how to engage in healthy selving; she only knows how to go through the motions, to put on a show in hopes that it will draw some attention. The philosopher, on the other hand, mumbles to herself about the impossibility of relationality: “La Création est défectueuse, l’amour impossible, le langage du silence qui ne sait pas se taire”<sup>78</sup> (10). For her, there is something inherently defective that prevents relationality, a paradoxical silence that cannot be quieted. The woman in the hat is more overt: “Pourquoi mon frère ne vient pas me voir? Tout le monde m’abandonne, Je suis une femme enfant, J’ai besoin qu’on m’aime, Tu ne me laisseras pas, hein, mon bébé, mon chéri?”<sup>79</sup> (12). The madwoman, like the exile, is starved for relationality, and like the exile, she attempts to find a replacement for that which has been lost. Such is the quest of all exiles; as Said observes in “Reflections on Exile”, “[e]xiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past... Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives...” (140-41). That which is lost by both the exile and the madwoman can be described in terms of relationality: the madwoman is unable to relate to other

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<sup>77</sup> “in front of the glass door at the end of the corridor, she is putting on a show of jealousy for the male nurse, dressed in blue from head to toe, who was holding her back, Nobody is taking care of me, I’m in pain, I’m at the verge of death and nobody gives a damn...”

<sup>78</sup> “Creation is defective, impossible love, the language of silence that doesn’t know how to shut up”

<sup>79</sup> “Why doesn’t my brother come and see me? Everyone abandons me, I’m an overgrown child, I need someone to love me, You won’t leave me, will you, eh, my baby, my darling?”

people within the framework of the dominant society, and the exile has been separated geographically from her original relational network.

The second chapter introduces the reader to the Organization, a shady group that is supposedly shadowing the narrator and spying on her. As she experiences a hallucination in her apartment, she hears the agents of the Organization:

J'entends au loin un bruit de moteur, c'est l'Organisation qui mobilise son armée et se prépare à m'envahir. Dans quelques minutes, ils seront devant ma porte. Ils broieront ma main valide : ils m'ont déjà forcée, il y a quelques jours, à casser un verre d'eau et à enfoncer un morceau de verre dans le creux de la main gauche, jusqu'à sectionner le tendon du pouce. (Sur le moment, je n'avais ressenti aucune douleur, le sang coulait, la plaie avait la forme d'un cœur palpitant, les envoyés de l'Organisation riaient, heureux du sacrifice.)<sup>80</sup> (20)

One of the most striking aspects of the narrator's madness is her perceived lack of agency. Though she is aware of The Organization's existence and of their every move, she is unable to pre-empt their violence. Moreover, the abuse that she suffers at their hands lessens her perception of her own feelings; though she can clearly see the wound on her hand—even noticing the gentle trembling that makes it resemble a beating heart—she is unable to feel any pain. Her selfing revolves around paranoia and fear, and as such, she is distanced not only from others, but also from her own self. It is also important to note that the Organization often makes its presence known through the sound of a motor, a sound that may represent the sound of the war machines that chased the narrator from her home country.

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<sup>80</sup> "In the distance I hear the sound of a motor, it's the Organization mobilizing its army and preparing to invade me. In a few minutes they'll be in front of my door. They'll mangle my good hand: they already forced me, a few days ago, to break a glass of water and stick a piece of glass in the palm of my left hand, to the point of severing the tendon of my thumb. (At the moment, I didn't feel any pain, the blood flowed, the wound had the form of a beating heart, the emissaries of the Organization laughed, happy with the sacrifice.)"



As is often the case with exiles, language plays an important part in the narrator's sense of alienation. As she escapes from her apartment, she sees two "fake tourists" speaking to each other: "Ils parlent la langue secrète de l'Organisation"<sup>81</sup> (21). She later reveals that she has learned to decode this language: "L'Organisation m'a fait passer le message hier dans un journal que je lis quotidiennement et que j'ai appris à décrypter: il est écrit dans la langue secrète de l'Organisation"<sup>82</sup> (22). Here the linguistic anxiety of the exile is taken to its extreme: in order to survive, she must learn an unfamiliar language and the customs of a strange group of people. Indeed, the narrator experiences the same paradox that Ollier describes in "Vinh L.": "it is the sine qua non of the colonized's condition: to exist, he has to correspond to the image of the other, an alienating image formulated by the colonizer, which prevents access to the so-called authentic self, but outside of which he cannot survive" (246). The narrator, in order to survive, must communicate in an alienating language that she associates with persecution, thus placing her in a subordinate position to the persecutors; the Organization's secret language forces the narrator to engage in unhealthy hierarchical selfing. For the narrator, this process is associated with fear and alienation, and the fear of death is ever-present. In his discussion of Lê's short story collection *Les dits d'un idiot*, Yeager explains why such linguistic alienation should be associated with death: "In Viet Nam, Confucianism and the cult of the ancestors emphasize deep roots, groundedness, familial blood lines, and long histories. Thus, uprootedness has serious repercussions..." (261). Likewise, the narrator's linguistic uprootedness is severs her ties

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<sup>81</sup> "They're speaking the secret language of the Organization."

<sup>82</sup> "The Organization passed me the message yesterday in a newspaper that I read daily and that I learned to decipher: it's written in the secret language of the Organization."

to her family, ties that are integral to her sense of self. The destruction of familial ties is thus a destruction of the self, or more plainly put, a form of death.

About one-third of the way through the narrative, the reader learns that the narrator is a writer who, like Lê, has attempted to create a narrative space in which she could explore her sense of self, but the Organization is working to destroy her literary project:

Ils sont venus, ils ont lu le manuscrit laissé sur la table et maintenant, de retour dans l'appartement, j'entends leur rire qui résonne entre les murs, leurs sarcasmes qui fusent des coins les plus reculés. C'est donc à *ça* qu'elle occupe ses journées, Elle s'éreinte à tricoter une petite romance tire-larmes, Tu mens, petite princesse cloîtrée dans le temple Littérature, Tu files un conte minaudier, On va t'en faire voir, Tu écriras sur NOUS, sur l'invasion des profanateurs...<sup>83</sup>(24)

For Delvaux, the Organization is forcing the narrator into what she calls (borrowing a phrase from Derrida) “the monolingualism of the Other” (202). Delvaux describes the linguistic alienation that takes place in *Lettre morte*: “Choosing French over Vietnamese, using the interdicted colonizer’s language instead of the interdicted colonized’s tongue, Lê invents herself within the space of exile and alienation” (203). For Delvaux, the fact of forcing the narrator to write in the language of the Organization is alienating because it denies her the right to exist within a liminal space. However, it is also important to place the colonizer/colonized (or writer/Organization) dynamic within the context of power structures. By denying the narrator the right to tell her own story in her own language, the Organization is denying her any voice or agency, and is also severing her relational bonds with her linguistic community. By forcing her to write in the idiom of the Organization,

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<sup>83</sup> “They came, they read the manuscript left on the table, and now, back in the apartment, I hear their laughter, which resonates between the walls, their jibes that burst from the farthest corners, So *that’s* how she occupies her days, she exhausts herself knitting together a little tear-jerker romance, You lie, little princess cloistered in the temple of Literature, You weave a mincing tale, We’ll show you, You’ll write about US, on the invasion of the profaners...”

her oppressors are forcing her into a hierarchical form of relationality, much like that of colonizer and colonized. In order to maintain the hierarchy and deny the narrator her voice, the Organization forces her to burn the manuscript (25). Here the narrator is, much like Lê herself, “abandonnée par les mots et leur pouvoir salvateur”<sup>84</sup> (Bacholle-Bošković 3). The Organization denies her both her literary voice and her ability to insert herself into a literary network of voices; she is thus denied the possibility of exploring her wounds or of attempting to heal them through writing.

However, while the language of the oppressor offers no refuge, neither does the language of the oppressed. Prior to the burning scenes, the narrator attempts to communicate with a friend using a coded language that the Organization does not understand: “J’envoie, au dos d’une carte, quelques mots griffonnés à l’ami. Il comprendra mon message codé et m’enverra de l’aide”<sup>85</sup> (22). This hope is dashed when the narrator discovers that her friend is actually not her friend: “L’ami à qui j’ai fait signe rue du Louvre ne viendra pas à mon aide. Il a rejoint l’Organisation, il en est devenu le Grand Inquisiteur qui envoie ses satellites chez moi, en mon absence”<sup>86</sup> (24). According to Delvaux, the betrayal can once again be traced to the problem of monolingualism, but in this case, it is the monolingualism of the colonized, rather than of the colonizer (203). By choosing to reject the idiom of the oppressor, the narrator is rejecting the possibility of a hybrid space in which she can safely form an exilic identity. On the other hand, the betrayal of her friend can also be attributed to unhealthy selving. Just as it would be

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<sup>84</sup> “abandoned by words and their saving power”

<sup>85</sup> “On the back of a card, I send a few scribbled words to my friend. He’ll understand my coded message and send help.”

<sup>86</sup> “The friend to whom I signaled on the rue du Louvre won’t come to my aid. He joined the Organization, he became its Grand Inquisitor who sends his agents to my house, in my absence.”

unhealthy for her to engage in selving on the oppressor's terms, it is unrealistic and impossible for her to attempt to maintain a sense of identity based on a network located across the world, rooted on a bond with a dead man whom she has not seen in years.

Indeed, the narrator's relationship with her father and her home country proves to be a burden that inhibits healthy selving. After the narrator burns the manuscript, the reader gets a glimpse into the narrator's past and a stronger indication of the source of her madness: "Une voix me réveille en sursaut, Et les lettres du père, que tu conserves si précieusement? Brûle-les aussi, On ne vit pas avec les morts, Détruis, Fais un bûcher de tout le passé..."<sup>87</sup> (25-26). The narrator's conservation of her father's letters recalls the incestuous Mortesaison of *Les trois parques*. Do describes her obsession with her dead twin brother's letters:

Just as her name, Mortesaison, indicates, she will live among the dead, in the heart of the dead season, because she has run away from the living people around her and taken refuge in the company of her twin's letters. Holding onto them, she shows how much she wanted to maintain this fraternal bond with him, how clearly she has heard the call of the homeland. (172)

Like Mortesaison, the narrator of *Voix* is unable to form healthy relational bonds because she has blocked herself from doing so. Her obsession with her guilt over her dead father occupies all of her emotions and attention, and she is thus incapable of accepting the fact that her bond to her father and thus to her homeland has been permanently severed.

The act of burning the letters is both a means of destroying the past and of attempting to sever her bonds with her deceased father, as revealed by a vision that the narrator has: "Mon père m'est apparu cette nuit. Il était enveloppé dans un manteau de

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<sup>87</sup> "A voice awakens me with a start, And the letters from your father that you preserved so carefully? Burn them too, We don't live with the dead, Destroy, Make a bonfire of all the past..."

feu. Il me demandait pourquoi je l'avais tué une second fois en brûlant les lettres"<sup>88</sup> (27).

As in *Lettre morte*, the father's letters represent impossibility. Winston explains the anxiety wrapped up in the letters: "Whereas *Calomnies* is a search for identity and the father, by *Lettre morte* the narrator finds herself left with nothing of her deceased father but a pile of his unopened letters to her. Written in a language she cannot decipher, they represent not communication or access to him, but the now irremedial impossibility of communication across diasporic borders" (194). The narrator's uprootedness has already strained her relational bonds with her family in her home country, but with the father's death, the letters are no longer a means of connecting her to that relational network, but rather a reminder of the permanence of that severing. She finds herself torn between holding onto memories of the past and of accepting the loss of her pre-exile bonds, and her anxiety manifests itself in madness and paranoia.

This vision is followed by a scene of self-destruction reminiscent of Zahra's pimple-picking episodes: "De ma main valide, je serre fort mon cou, j'enfonce les ongles dans la chair. Je me frappe la tête contre le mur"<sup>89</sup> (28). It is later revealed that self-destruction is the goal of the Organization: "Il te faut te détruire, me dit une voix"<sup>90</sup> (29). This self-destruction is a strange twist on the incestuous love of *Les trois parques* as explained by Do: "Nostalgia for this other half, either lost or buried within oneself, endows sibling incest with a narcissistic scope where love for the other is also a form of self-love" (173). In the case of the narrator and her father, the obsession is not incestuous,

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<sup>88</sup> "My father appeared to me that night. He was enveloped in a cloak of fire. He asked me why I had killed him a second time by burning the letters."

<sup>89</sup> "With my good hand, I grab my throat, I dig my nails into the flesh. I hit my head against the wall."

<sup>90</sup> "You must destroy yourself, a voice tells me."

but it is nonetheless reflexive: after (supposedly) destroying her father through neglect, the daughter feels compelled to destroy herself. The parent-daughter bond that existed during the father's lifetime has morphed into an even more unhealthy form of selving in which the dead father, through no will of his own, holds power over his daughter, and he is unable to reverse the damage that she does to herself in her misguided attempt to do his will.

Later in the same vision, she sees her father in an episode that underlines her powerlessness: "Mon père apparaît sur l'autre rive, dans son manteau de feu. Il me hèle. Son manteau jette des étincelles, des lettres flamboyantes, voyelles et consonnes bleues que lèchent les langues de feu et où je reconnais l'écriture de mon père, grande et majestueuse. J'appelle mon père au secours. Mais aucun son ne sort de ma bouche"<sup>91</sup> (30). With her father's death, the narrator has lost her own voice. For the narrator, as for Lê herself, the dead father is a necessary, but inaccessible, interlocutor. Delvaux explains: "Writing, for Lê, is dictated by 'the obsession with a malformation' (*Lettre morte* 330)—that of exile—and is addressed to a dead double, a silent judge—her absent father" (201). However, the wound that results from her exile and her father's subsequent death is not merely one of the loss of voice; it is also a loss of self that she experiences. The exchanges with her father were the basis of her most fundamental relational bond, and her failure to maintain that bond through her exile has damaged her sense of self. With her father's death, the malformation of exile has become irreversible.

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<sup>91</sup> "My father appears on the other bank, in his cloak of fire. He hails me. His cloak throws out sparks, flaming letters, blue vowels and consonants that are licked by the tongues of fire and in which I recognize the writing of my father, tall and majestic. I call to my father for help. But no sound comes out of my mouth."

Later she has yet another vision in which she cannot reach her father: “Mon père est debout sur une péniche en feu. Je dérive sur l’eau, je tente de le rejoindre. Mais les têtes coupées happent mes cheveux, me tirent en arrière”<sup>92</sup> (39). Once again, her vision underlines “the impossibility of achieving union with the homeland following departure” (Roberts 331). However, the exile is not only geographic; it is also relational. The severed heads represent not only the physical separation between the narrator and her homeland, but also the impossibility of reaching her father from across the boundaries of death. Moreover, the image of the boat and the water recalls the wave of so-called “boat people” who fled from Vietnam following the end of the 1975 war. The father’s death and the daughter’s madness begin long before the beginning of the novel; the beginning of their physical exile was also the beginning of their psychic exile, and their failure to reach across the physical divide resulted in an irreparable gulf between their two selves.

The connection between the father’s death and the narrator’s death is underlined in a later vision. After being told by a voice that she must save the person laid out under a sheet on her bed, she removes the sheet and discovers that it is herself that she must save: “Je soulève le drap qui cache le visage de l’inconnu. C’est moi qui gis là. C’est mon cadavre que je vois. Mon père apparaît près du lit, dans son manteau de feu, Pourquoi ne m’as-tu pas sauvé?”<sup>93</sup> (45) Here it becomes clear that the narrator is, as Bacholle-Bošković observes, “[affectée] par l’absence du double ou de l’être cher”<sup>94</sup> (8). The relationality between the daughter and the father is extremely toxic, for not only has their

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<sup>92</sup> “My father is standing on a flaming barge. I drift on the water, I try to reach him. But the severed heads snap at my hair, hold me back.”

<sup>93</sup> “I lift the sheet that hides the face of the stranger. It’s me lying there. It’s my corpse that I see. My father appears by the bed, in his cloak of fire, Why didn’t you save me?”

<sup>94</sup> “affected by the absence of the double or of the dear one”

bond been severed by exile and death, but at the same time, the daughter's identity has been to a certain degree subsumed by that of her father, a form of selving that Joseph explicitly describes as unhealthy (*IS* 12). By allowing herself to be so consumed by her father, the narrator has also allowed her father's death to become a form of death for herself, for she is not able to form a self apart from the now-severed bond between herself and her father.

This inability to engage in intimate selving has made the narrator a nomad. The next several visions take place in the narrator's home country, giving the reader a stronger sense of her alienation and rootlessness. In the first one, she finds her childhood home destroyed: "Je suis au pays de mon enfance. Je cherche la maison aux volets bleus. Il ne reste qu'un tas de cendres. Des lettres brillent au fond, voyelles mutilées, consonnes aux jambages arrachés. Je plonge ma main, remue la cendre, d'où monte une voix, Tu l'as tué"<sup>95</sup> (47). As Chirol observes in her analysis of *Calomnies*, language does not have the power to restore the ruins of the past: "Linda Lê fait partie de ces âmes déracinées qui cherchent en vain dans le souvenir et l'écriture un passé marqué par le désastre et dont il ne reste tout au plus que des ruines"<sup>96</sup> (91). The mutilated letters at the bottom of the pile of ashes recalls both the father's letters and the narrator's manuscript, both of which have been burned at the orders of the Organization. Neither her memories of the past nor her attempts to create a narrative space for herself have allowed her to re-create the relational bonds that have been severed by her exile.

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<sup>95</sup> "I'm in the country of my childhood. I'm searching for the house with blue shutters. There's nothing but a pile of ashes. Letters are shining at the bottom, mutilated vowels, consonants with the legs torn off. I plunge my hand in, stir the ashes, out of which comes a voice, You killed him."

<sup>96</sup> "Linda Lê is one of those uprooted souls who search in vain in memory and in writing for a past marked by disaster, of which nothing remains but ruins."



The next vision reveals that not only her childhood home, but her her entire village is destroyed and deserted:

J'erre dans les rues du pays de mon enfance. La ville est déserte. Partout ruines et cendres. Mon père apparaît, disparaît entre les ruines. Je suis sa trace. Je pénètre dans un zoo. Les cages sont vides. Je longe un pont. Le fleuve est à sec. Les arbres des jardins, calcinés, tendent leurs bras noirs vers le ciel. Dans les rues, les hurlements des chiens à trois têtes me poursuivent. Le bruit de moteur fait mal à mes oreilles. L'Organisation a saccagé la ville, pour que je ne puisse trouver refuge nulle part.<sup>97</sup> (48)

This imagery emphasizes the impossibility of return, a recurring theme in many of Lê's novels. Do discusses the problematic desire for a return to the homeland in *Les trois parques*: "Incestuous or monstrous ties, this is how Lê defines her relation to her birth country... The return to the homeland (one might say motherland) or the psychological regression to the mother's womb, however, proves to be not only impossible but also fatal for the exiled twins" (173). Though the narrator of *Voix* has no incestuous feelings for her father, her relationship to her father and her relationship to her homeland are intimately linked, and her desire to return is both an attempt to salvage the severed ties with her father and to re-discover the relational network of her homeland. Because of her father's death, both have become impossible, and her homeland has thus been depopulated and destroyed.

Following this series of visions, the narrator visits her friend, the painter "B." Though she initially seems at ease with him, her paranoia quickly takes over, and she becomes convinced that he is also an agent of the Organization: "Le regard de B. s'attarde longuement sur moi. L'Organisation m'a devancée: lui aussi a rejoint l'ordre

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<sup>97</sup> "I wander the streets of the country of my childhood. The city is deserted. Everywhere ruins and ashes. My father appears, disappears among the ruins. I follow his trail. I enter a zoo. The cages are empty. I walk along a bridge. The river is dry. The trees in the gardens, charred, stretch out their black arms toward the sky. In the streets, the screams of three-headed dogs pursue me. The sound of a motor hurts my ears. The Organization has sacked the city, so I cannot find safe haven anywhere."

des Grands Inquisiteurs”<sup>98</sup> (54-55). Though B, as a fellow exile and artist, should be a safe person for the narrator, she discovers that even her countrymen cannot be trusted. The narrator is experiencing what Bacholle-Bošković describes as “the alienation due to a form of rootlessness (an alienation experienced by the colonized and the migrant in particular but that each one of us should recognize) which is characterized by ‘the absence of a stable model of identification for an ego’” (203). In other words, the narrator does not have a stable network from which she can construct a coherent sense of self. Her uncertainty about her relationship to her home country, to France, to her father, and to her friends leads to a lack of clarity about her own self. In particular, the failure of her process of intimate selving with her father has prevented her from engaging in intimate selving with B, a fellow exile who would be able to bridge the gap between the home country and the land of exile.

As the narrator wanders the streets after leaving B, she comes across several landmarks that remind her of dead foreign writers, the only group to which she feels connected:

Je longe la rue de Vaugirard à la recherche d’un hôtel où un romancier allemand s’est donné la mort le jour de l’entrée des troupes nazies dans Paris. Je partage son sort... Je marche jusqu’à la périphérie de Paris, je suis à Meudon, où une poétesse russe a vécu les dernières années de sa vie avant de rentrer se pendre dans son pays. Je suis sa réincarnation.<sup>99</sup> (61-62)

The narrator places herself amongst the writers of what Bacholle-Bošković calls

“littérature déplacée”: “une littérature malvenue, inconvenante car elle ne trouvera jamais

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<sup>98</sup> “B.’s gaze lingers on me. The Organization has overtaken me: he has also joined the ranks of the Grand Inquisitors.”

<sup>99</sup> “I walk along the rue de Vaugirard in search of a hotel where a German novelist killed himself the day the Nazi troops entered Paris. I share his fate... I walk to the outskirts of Paris. I am at Meudon, where a Russian poetess lived the last years of her life before returning to hang herself in her country. I am her reincarnation.”

son lieu propre, elle sera à jamais importune dans le paysage littéraire (français en l'occurrence)"<sup>100</sup> (8). Though Roberts argues that Lê's novels make positive use of hybrid space (331), the two writers cited above were clearly not able to do so, and the narrator sees herself as sharing their lot in life. Besides their failure to create a healing narrative space, they were also unable to cope with the homeland; the Russian went home only to hang herself, while the German killed himself upon the arrival of his countrymen in his place of exile. Likewise, the narrator recognizes the impossibility of return for her father, the spectral incarnation of her own homeland, is constantly associated with death.

Nonetheless, the narrator still considers the idea of a return. In Meudon, she sees a house that reminds her of her childhood home, and entertains the possibility that it may offer her salvation, or at least respite from her persecution:

J'erre dans les petites rues de Meudon. Devant une maison basse aux volets fermés, semblable à la maison de mon enfance, je vois une pancarte, CHAMBRE À LOUER. Si je vis là, en pénitence, l'Organisation desserrera peut-être l'étau. Je vivrai pauvrement, en faisant des ménages. Les envoyés de l'Organisation riront, heureux du sacrifice.<sup>101</sup> (62)

However, this attempt to return to the homeland will clearly not offer any true respite; even the narrator recognizes that it would merely be a sacrifice to satisfy the Organization, which feeds on her anguish. Linda Lê herself addressed the impossibility of such a return. Roberts cites her: "Nelly Sachs disait, Un étranger porte sa patrie dans les bras comme une orpheline pour laquelle il ne cherche rien d'autre qu'un tombeau. La

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<sup>100</sup> "an unwelcome literature, unseemly because it will never find its proper place, it will forever be unwelcome in the literary landscape (in this case, French)"

<sup>101</sup> "I wander through the narrow streets of Meudon. Before a low house with closed shutters, like the house of my childhood, I see a sign, ROOM FOR RENT. If I live there, in penance, the Organization may loosen the noose. I will live in poverty, by cleaning houses. The emissaries of the Organization will laugh, happy with the sacrifice."

réconciliation est impossible, impossible le retour”<sup>102</sup> (331). The bond that the narrator carries with her is dead, and there is no possibility of reviving it. By carrying it with her, she is merely prolonging a burden that increases her pain. Thus by renting the room in the house, she would be playing into the hands of the Organization, preventing herself from unburdening herself of a useless bond and creating new, living bonds.

However, though she finds no refuge in the house with the shutters, she does find temporary refuge in her sister’s house:

J’arrive chez [ma sœur] à la tombée de la nuit. Bienvenue, me dit-elle, Tu as l’air fatiguée, Entre et repose-toi. Sa petite fille joue dans un coin. Je n’entends plus le bruit de moteur, le martèlement des bottes. Je m’assois à la table. Ma sœur coud des rideaux. Tout est paisible. Les hommes de l’Organisation ne sont pas encore arrivés ici. Je regarde jouer la petite fille. Je mange et me couche.<sup>103</sup> (62-63)

The sounds of the Organization—the sounds of war—are silenced in the presence of family. However, Delvaux notes, the sense of “home” that she feels in this locale is illusory: “The ‘demeure’ that we rely on, suggests Derrida, the home that we imagine as ours and that we perpetually mourn, whose absence makes us nostalgic, can never be anything other than a fiction...” (203). The narrator’s sense of peace comes from the illusion of a bond to her home country, brought on by the presence of family. However, the fact of exile has changed the dynamic of her relational bonding, and the peace that she feels cannot last if she does not adapt to her exilic situation.

Indeed, this peace is soon disturbed by another appearance by the father:

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<sup>102</sup> “Nelly Sachs said, A foreigner carries his homeland in his arms like an orphan for whom he seeks nothing other than a tomb. Reconciliation is impossible, return is impossible.” [My translation.]

<sup>103</sup> “I arrive at [my sister’s] house at nightfall. Welcome, she says, You look tired, come in and rest. Her little girl is playing in a corner. I no longer hear the noise of the motor, the hammering of boots. I sit at the table. My sister mends some curtains. Everything is peaceful. The men of the Organization haven’t yet arrived here. I watch the little girl play. I eat and go to bed.”

Mais au milieu de la nuit, de nouvelles angoisses m'étreignent. Je cours jusqu'au bord de l'eau. Les voix crient, Saute, saute donc. Je cours le long de la rive à la poursuite de mon père dont le manteau de feu rougeoit dans l'obscurité... Le fleuve murmure,... Tu l'as tué... Mon père réapparaît sur l'autre rive, enveloppé dans un suaire. Je l'appelle. Il prend feu... Les voix plantent des coups de couteau dans mon dos, Tu l'as tué.<sup>104</sup> (63)

Here the narrator is blocked from engaging in intimate selfing with her fellow exile and sister, for she cannot break free of what Delvaux calls “an endless process of mourning that reveals the traces, marks, and scars of an impossible origin” (205). It is notable that in this scene the father’s mantle of fire is temporarily replaced by a shroud, thus emphasizing his death. The narrator’s obsession with her father, rather than functioning as a healthy relational bond, serves as a scar that forever prevents her from forming new bonds. Moreover, because her father is connected to the home country, his death underlines the impossibility of her origins; that is, in the absence of the father, it becomes clearer that the narrator cannot engage in selfing based on the networks of her home country, which, it seems, include her sister and her niece.

However, the narrator appears to find a way to assuage her guilt and sever her ties with her father, at least temporarily. The next episode of tranquility occurs when the narrator escapes to the mountains:

Je sens la paix m'envahir. Le chemin couvert de neige semble ne conduire nulle part... L'angoisse m'a quittée. Les hurlements des chiens se sont tus. Le bruit de moteur ne me parvient plus. Mon père s'approche dans son manteau de feu. Il s'assoit sur une pierre. Je saisis un pan du manteau, que j'éteins avec une boule de neige. Patiemment, j'éteins le manteau rougeoyant en ramassant la poudre neigeuse que j'applique sur les blessures de mon père. Il gémit. Son corps apparaît, calciné, sous le

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<sup>104</sup> “But in the middle of the night, new anxieties take hold of me.. I run up to the water's edge. The voices cry, Jump, jump then. I run along the shore in pursuit of my father whose cloak of fire glows red in the dark ... The river murmurs, ... You killed him... My father reappears on the other side, wrapped in a shroud. I call him. He catches fire ... The voices plant a knife in my back, You killed him.”

manteau. Il sourit. Je danse autour de mon père... Une voix dit, Tu l'as sauvé.<sup>105</sup> (67-68)

Although the voice tells the narrator that she has saved her father, the healing is actually mutual. Indeed, this is the closest the author ever comes to intimate selving, for this is the one moment when her relationship with her father appears to be reciprocal and nurturing (*IS* 2). That said, it is important to note that this episode of healing is actually illusory, for the relationship with her father cannot by definition be reciprocal, for she is alive, and he is dead.

It is immediately apparent that the narrator has not experienced complete healing, for after leaving her father, she has one last encounter with the Organization. She stops by a small, hidden inn, where an old lady serves her tea. At first the setting seems safe, but this is interrupted: “Mais un homme sort de la cuisine. Il a de grosses mains velues et porte un tablier taché. Un grand chien le suit, se faufile dans la pièce et vient renifler autour de moi. L’homme me scrute. C’est un envoyé de l’Organisation. Je dois repartir”<sup>106</sup> (68-69). Once again, the narrator is experiencing Delvaux’s “alienation as a form of rootlessness” (203). Though she has unburdened herself of her scarred bond with her father, she has not been able to re-establish herself within a relational network in her land of exile. as such, she must continue to wander, roaming around the country in search of relationality and the stability of identity that comes with rootedness.

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<sup>105</sup> “I feel peace come over me. The snow-covered path seems to lead nowhere ... The anguish has left me. The howls of the dogs have fallen silent. The noise of the motor no longer reaches me. My father approaches in his cloak of fire. He sits on a stone. I take a piece of the cloak, I put it out with a ball of snow. Patiently, I extinguish the glowing cloak, picking up the powdered snow, which I apply to my father’s wounds. He groans. His body appears, charred, under the mantle. He smiles. I dance around my father ... A voice says, You have saved him.”

<sup>106</sup> “But a man comes out of the kitchen. He has large, hairy hands, and he’s wearing a stained apron. A large dog follows him, sneaks around the room, and comes over to sniff around me. The man examines me. He’s an emissary of the Organization. I have to leave.”

However, the narrator once again finds temporary peace in solitude: “Je m’enfonce dans le chemin de neige. Tout est calme autour de moi. Je n’entends ni le bruit de moteur ni les hurlements des chiens... Je suis seule... Une profonde paix descend en moi”<sup>107</sup> (69). As Roberts observes, this peace is only temporary, and it does not offer true healing, for she eventually finds herself in the asylum:

The voices are silenced and syntactical order is restored in this landscape of grief, white being the color of mourning in Vietnam. As the novel effectively begins at the end, however, it is clear that this is a momentary respite for the narrator. From her tumultuous inner world, the narrator emerges into the cacophony of the asylum, finding herself to be equally isolated. The passivity and silence of the narrator is juxtaposed with the constant stream of noise and action provided by her fellow inmates. The only escape from the polyphonic world she occupies is death, which provides the possibility of full union with her father (and by extension the homeland) and atonement for her neglect. (339)

Though the narrator has resolved her guilt about her lost relationship with her father and with her homeland, she cannot find true healing because she is still isolated; that is, she has not managed to forge new, healthy relational bonds. She still holds onto the bond with her dead father, unwilling to let go of it in order to allow her to form new bonds and insert herself into a new relational network. Likewise, the asylum does not offer the possibility of healing because it is filled with people who, like the narrator, are unable to form healthy bonds. Although she is in the midst of people, she is still alone. Only death can make the bond with her father reciprocal and thus viable.

## Conclusion

The narrator’s madness cannot be simply attributed to exile; as we see in “Women of Algiers in their Apartment,” it is possible to overcome the wounds of exile. In order to

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<sup>107</sup> “I sink into the snowy path. Everything is calm around me. I cannot hear any engine noise or the howling of dogs... I am alone... A deep peace descends on me.”

understand her madness, we must understand how exactly her exile wounded her. The centrality of the father's ghost makes it clear that her relationship with him is the greatest source of her anxiety. Throughout her visions, it becomes clear that the father's ghost represents not only the severed relational bond with the father, but also the narrator's separation from the relational network of her homeland, while the Organization represents the land of exile. The narrator's visions of her father, as well as her later visions of her homeland, reveal that she has not accepted the severing of her relational bonds following her exile; meanwhile, her fear of the Organization shows her unwillingness or inability to enter into a relational network in her land of exile. When she finally allows herself to lay her father to rest, it appears initially that she has healed herself—"Je sens la paix m'envahir" (67) —; however, she has only completed the first step of healing. This becomes evident when she once again encounters the Organization after laying her father's ghost to rest. In order to truly heal, she must not only accept the severing of her old bonds, but open herself to the creation of new bonds. Until she does so, she will remain in the asylum, alone in the crowd.

This chapter, along with the previous two, emphasizes the vastly differing literary representations of women's experiences of warfare. Though the narrator may not have directly experienced the violence of war directly (that question is never answered in the novel), Lê's narrator, like Djébar's Anne, experiences the wounds of exile. Like Sarah, she experiences the loss of a parent from a distance. Like Zahra, she witnesses the division of her country and the alienation of family and friends. However, each woman experiences her wounds differently, and every attempt at healing takes a vastly differing form with differing amounts of success.



The final chapter will examine in greater detail the connections between the women's experiences of war and the form of their wounds and healing processes. In particular I will examine the ways in which the Indochina Wars combine elements of the Algerian Revolution (particularly the First Indochina War, which was primarily an anti-colonial revolution) and the Lebanese Civil War (which, like the Second Indochina War, was a combination civil war and neocolonial proxy war).

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: Differentiating the Wounds of War

#### Introduction

The previous chapters focused on four different aspects of intimate selving in the writings of Assia Djebar, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Linda Lê. These aspects are as follows: First, intimate selving is about selves that are not bounded and autonomous (*IS* 2, 9, 12). Secondly, the process of intimate selving is dynamic, reactive, and mutual (*IS* 2, 12). Third, intimate selving involves a form of embeddedness that encompasses agency (*IS* 2, 12, 15). Finally, the process of intimate selving is neither individualist nor collectivist (*IS* 2, 11, 17). There are two important aspects of intimate selving that have not been discussed in detail: the first of these is that intimate selving is historically and culturally specific: “It is about notions of self and relationality that are gendered because of culturally specific (not universal) notions of gendered child ‘development’ and because of locally specific and changing dynamics of power” (*IS* 2). Secondly, intimate selving may be necessary for survival in certain cultural contexts:

In societies in which the family or community is as or more valued than the person, in which persons achieve meaning in the context of family or community and in which survival depends upon the integration into family or community, such relationality may support the production of what is locally recognized as healthy, responsible and mature persons. (*IS* 9)

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to examine the ways in which intimate selving differs across the writings of Djebar, al-Shaykh, and Lê (as well as to compare the

similarities) and to understand the ways in which intimate selving is an important survival method in each of these contexts. That is, I will compare the specific methods that the characters use in their selving processes and identify the aspects of their respective cultures that determine the methods of selving and how those methods of selving help them to survive (or fail to help them survive) within their particular context.

It is important to note that I am not proposing any of these authors as representatives of their countries' women. Indeed, within Djébar's two short stories, we see several different examples of intimate selving, each of which takes a very different form. Rather, the purpose here is to demonstrate the diversity of forms that intimate selving may take, as well as to propose links between both personal experience and cultural and political context. While it is evident that different women may experience intimate selving in varying fashions even within the same cultural context, it is important to understand the ways in which local culture may influence the modes of intimate selving. Therefore, each character's mode of intimate selving represents one of many possible forms that intimate selving may take within one specific cultural and historical moment. It is also important to observe that there are some points of commonality among the different forms of intimate selving. This does not mean that intimate selving necessarily includes these aspects (aside from the qualities that necessarily define intimate selving), nor that intimate selving is an instinctual, inborn process. By examining the consistencies that occur among the various examples of intimate selving, I am simply attempting to identify some cross-cultural practices and values that may be found in Algerian, Lebanese, and Vietnamese societies at the times at which these literary works were produced.

## Contrasting National and Community Coherence

In order to understand the different forms of violence experienced by individuals, we must first examine the different ways in which the wars impacted the perceived coherence of a national or proto-national identity and the impact it had upon the coherence of communities within the emerging nation, particularly as represented in the literary works under examination. In the case of Algeria, the revolution pitted the formerly colonized Algerian nation against the French colonizers; as Fanon observed, the process of anti-colonial revolution necessitated the substitution of one species—the colonized—with a new one—the decolonized.<sup>108</sup> Such a substitution also necessitates a substitution of one form of selving for another. Under a colonial system, selving is hierarchical; identities are based on an institutionalized power differential that defines certain selves (the colonized) as disempowered and others (the colonizers) as empowered. The process of decolonization should ideally establish a system in which selving is non-hierarchical; that is, all selves should be in a position of empowerment and mutual support.<sup>109</sup> However, as Djébar observes, the Algerian Revolution did not live up to this ideal: “I never use that term [revolution]; I call it ‘the Algerian war’” (*Women of Algiers* 178). After the war, “Algerian men quickly imposed a neotraditional system that deprived the dreaded ‘new women’ of any voice” (Cooke, “Arab Women Arab Wars” 17). Though the Algerian rebels won the war, their victory did not erase the lines of conflict and create

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<sup>108</sup> “decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind for another” (*Wretched* 1)

<sup>109</sup> “Relationality, then, becomes, not an explanation of dysfunctionality but rather a description of a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding, and sociability.” (*IS* 9)

“Connectivity necessitates neither inequality in general (hierarchy) nor the subordination of women and juniors in particular (patriarchy).” (*IS* 12)

a new, non-hierarchical society; rather, it shifted the lines, dividing the Algerian people along gender lines. Given this hierarchy, intimate selving is inhibited, particularly between men and women. In order to create an environment in which intimate selving is possible, as Sarah notes,<sup>110</sup> a new revolution is required, one that re-defines societal structures in non-hierarchical terms and allows for agency for all citizens.

The lines of conflict in Lebanon were drawn very differently. There was no real sense of a unified nation in the area that is now known as the Lebanese republic; rather, it was a grouping of different peoples of varying religions and ethnic origins united first by the Ottoman Empire and later by the French mandate. Moreover, unlike the people of colonial-era Algeria, who generally viewed the French as enemies, the various peoples of the Lebanese mandate maintained strong ties to foreign governments.<sup>111</sup> As such, there was no sense of a unified national identity, and selving was based not on a network of selves that cohered as a nation, but rather on a dynamic of opposition and division. During the period of the civil war itself, communities did form militias, but these did not function to unite communities; rather, they served to strengthen the divisions between the various groups within Lebanon. The confessional system, the political system based on membership in religious communities, had codified distinct roles and social positions for the various communities, thus deepening the fissures between groups. Finally, the physical division of the country, the separation of cities and neighborhoods by snipers,

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<sup>110</sup> ““this is the moment . . . that Ishmael will really wail in the desert: the walls torn down by us will continue to surround him alone!”” (51)

<sup>111</sup> “The inter-war period was marked by animosity between the French-backed Maronites on one side and an alliance of Sunnis and Greek Orthodox Christians on the other. With their patriarch based in Damascus, Greek Orthodox Christians had a long history of harmonious relations with their Muslim rulers. They now allied with Sunnis in their opposition to the Maronite plans to create a Western-oriented state in an independent Lebanon, and sought the merger of their country with an adjoining Syria. In this conflict France played the role of a biased mediator.” (Hiro 4)

checkpoints, and barriers, disrupted exchanges amongst different social groups and geographical regions of the country.<sup>112</sup> Even within communities, as *Hekayat Zahra* shows, social networks were disrupted, placing a strain on selving processes both within and between communities. This problem was compounded by the massive number of refugees—both internal and international—created by the war. Although communities did find ways to overcome these divisions, the war did significantly diminish the capacity of the Lebanese people to engage in healthy selving practices. Moreover, the ability to overcome obstacles to intimate selving was an important part of surviving the war. Because of this, Lebanese women, unlike the women of Algeria, came to be seen as more valuable members of society as a result of the war. Although women made significant and important contributions to both wars, Algerian women were subsumed within a national collective, which inhibited their ability to engage in true intimate selving.<sup>113</sup> In Lebanon, on the other hand, women were actively engaged in community-building, and intimate selving was an integral part of their contribution to the war effort. For those women who were able to participate in the formation of social networks, it was possible to recover to a certain degree from the psychic damage of war.<sup>114</sup> In the absence of

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<sup>112</sup> “During and immediately after the war, each of the two camps made efforts to consolidate its territory. Thus Beirut lost its unity as an urban center and communications between the two sectors became rather difficult, despite the five main crossing-points, as they were severely restricted by sniper fire.” (Shehadeh 18)

<sup>113</sup> “I suggest a construct that is neither individualist nor corporatist, but relational.” (IS 11)

<sup>114</sup> “[W]ar, entering the homes, politicized the daily lives of women and forced them out into the public arena to meet new situations, armed only with antiquated traditional skills and patterns that they skillfully used to help their families remain afloat. The roles of mother and housewife acquired a new political dimension, whether on the individual or the collective levels... The war, thus, raised the social awareness of women and made them conscious of the importance of their role in developing a dynamic civic society for the purpose of advancement and development. This led not only to an increase in governmental organizations, but an increase in the rate of women’s participation in such organizations.” (Shehadeh 325) See also pp. 86-87 of this dissertation.

intimate selving, however, the war could create a great sense of isolation and hopelessness.

For the purposes of this particular study, the lines of conflict in the Indochina wars are less important than the question of exile. This is not to say that the lines of conflict are irrelevant to the wars; however, the novel in question, *Voix*, represents the wounds of war primarily in terms of exile rather than in terms of different communities in conflict with each other. It is important to note that exile is not free from conflict; as Robin May Schott notes, “[w]omen refugees are frequently victims twice—during the violence and persecution in their home country, as well as during flight, in camps and settlements, and even in the process of integration into a new society” (24). However, the conflict that causes and results from exile is only a part of the damage of war, including the Indochina wars. Those who relocated to refugee camps were subjected to harsh conditions, hunger, and disease,<sup>115</sup> as well as rampant paranoia and well-placed mistrust of their fellow refugees.<sup>116</sup> Besides physically separating members of existing communities, then, exile may place people in new groupings in which intimate selving is inhibited because people resist embeddedness. Moreover, the people who were left behind also suffered from the rupturing of relational bonds: “Villagers were unnerved when neighbors moved away and were never seen again” (Hunt 143). Compared to the greatly-fragmented Lebanon, where neighbors may or may not be enemies, Vietnam was

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<sup>115</sup> A family of seven to nine would squeeze into a shack with a cement floor measuring three meters square under an unshaded tin roof. Amid the miserable and unsanitary living conditions, as widespread dysentery and other epidemics killed children and the weak, the village elders petitioned the Vietnamese authorities and the ROK combat authority to permit their return home. (Kwon, *After the Massacre* 51)

<sup>116</sup> Inside the refugee camps, there were South Vietnamese police informers as well as covert civilian agitprop activists loyal to the communist side. The former disseminated information about violent situations in the rural area and instigated fear; the Vietcong... activists fought this psychological war with counterinformation. Both forms of information were often exaggerated and unreliable. (Kwon, *After the Massacre* 32)

largely divided into two camps, north and south, and peasants had little loyalty to their respective governments. Rather, their loyalty was to their families and neighbors. As such, exile resulted in the removal of individuals from social networks that were important to survival. In Lebanon, by contrast, the loss of social networks was the cause of, rather than the result of, exile. Moreover, communities in Lebanon were more successful in re-creating social structures to support their communities during the war. In Indochina, government and military corruption, as well as historic conflicts between peasants and landowners, made such structures very difficult to re-establish.<sup>117</sup> In the case of Algeria, however, exile was primarily a problem for pieds-noirs, such as Anne. Because there was little interaction between pieds-noirs and native Algerians—Algeria being largely segregated—exile had less impact upon those who remained in Algeria as it did on those in Indochina or even Lebanon. However, as I will discuss below, Sarah’s experience in Barberousse prison bears some similarities to exile.

### Contextualizing Selving

Now that we have established the contexts within which the various characters engage in intimate selving, we may examine and compare the modes of selving in order to better understand how and why the characters’ individual modes of selving differ. Because Djébar’s texts include more characters than *The Story of Zahra* and *Voix*, this section will focus on Algeria, and it will demonstrate more diversity in modes of selving for that country. This is not meant to suggest that the Algerian Revolution is more

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<sup>117</sup> “historic conflicts in Vietnamese society, notable the division between the masses of tenant farmers and the relatively small but politically connected cohort of landowners and entrepreneurs, stymied the spread of these new commodities” (Biggs 157); “American investigations into such conflicts merely showed the extent to which red tape in the Vietnamese government stalled such projects.” (Biggs 158). Biggs is referring specifically to American aid to promote agricultural development in the Mekong Delta.



complex than the other two wars, nor that the modes of selving are more complex in Algeria. Had this study included more texts from Lebanon and Indochina, it would be possible to see equally diverse modes of selving amongst the characters from those two countries. Unfortunately, constraints of time and space prevent us from examining more texts at the present.

### Exile

In “Femmes d’Alger,” Anne’s mode of selving is largely influenced by her experience of exile. As a *pied-noir*, she was not considered a part of the community that was formed after the end of French colonialism and the establishment of the independent Algerian republic. However, it is not the separation from an Algerian community that causes her the greatest distress; rather, it is a sense of disconnectedness from her own self. This is evident in her words to Sarah: “cette ville où, paraît-il, je suis née, que j’avais oubliée”<sup>118</sup> (15). Even her birth is uncertain to her, and her birthplace is not even a memory, for she has forgotten it. Nonetheless, her life in France feels foreign to her, and her life does not feel like her own: “Anne débite ensuite une histoire chronologique, en ordre. « Son » histoire ; le mari, les trois enfants, quinze années d’une vie étrangère contenue dans une heure de mots : est-ce banal ? C’est banal”<sup>119</sup> (15). Anne cannot relate to others because she cannot relate to herself. In this respect Anne is demonstrating Said’s assertion that the exile is forever searching for the homeland: “Exile... is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (137). Having experienced this rift, Anne deeply feels the loss of “the

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<sup>118</sup> “this city where I apparently was born” (8)

<sup>119</sup> “Then Anne chronologically pours out a story, a predictable one. ‘Her’ story; the husband, the three children, fifteen years of a strange [foreign—see footnote on p.44] life contained in one hour of words: Is it trite? It’s trite.” (8)

nourishment of tradition [and] family” (Said 138). However, when she returns to Algeria, she realizes that she has no community or connections there either, and thus her only reason for return must be to die. Anne’s lack of network can be attributed to her status as a *pied-noir*; having been born in Algeria, she has no network in France, but as an Algerian of French descent, there is no place for her in the society created in Algeria following the revolution. In order to heal, she must become a member of the new Algerian community. The first step in this process is to join the women of Algiers in a space specifically designated for them, a place where they have a voice. As Baya informs Anne, the *hammam* is, for many women, the only place where they can go outside the house: “Nombre de femmes ne peuvent sortir que pour le bain”<sup>120</sup> (38). As she witnesses the interactions of the women, she gradually begins to feel a part of a community. However, the process of intimate selving is not complete for Anne until she acknowledges herself as part of a network, or “chain,” as she calls it.<sup>121</sup> Once Anne does this, she finds that Algeria is no longer a place of death, but rather a place of possibilities; moreover, the possibilities that she envisions are part of a shared future, for she speaks of her future actions in the plural—“*nous* prendrons *ensemble* le bateau” (62)/“we’ll take the boat *together*” (52) [emphasis added]. For Anne, the idea of being part of a network of selves is a new one; up to this point, she has been presented as an isolated individual. Healing, for Anne, is not an issue of re-forming relational bonds, but rather one of becoming a part of a relational network for the first time.

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<sup>120</sup> “Many women can only go out to the baths.” (30)

<sup>121</sup> “Anne se mit à penser: dans cette ville étrange, ivre de soleil mais des prisons cernant haut chaque rue, chaque femme vit-elle pour son propre compte, ou d’abord pour la chaîne des femmes autrefois enfermées, génération après génération, tandis que déversait la même lumière, un bleu immuable, rarement terni ?” (58)/ “Anne began to think: in this strange city, drunk with the sun but with prisons high up on every street, does every woman live first for herself or for the chain of women once locked in, generation after generation, while the same light, an unchangeable, rarely dimmed blue, continues to pour forth?” (48)

This is very different from the exile experienced by the narrator of *Voix*. As with Anne, we learn very little of her childhood and youth, and we are not told of any specific relationships from before her exile. However, as with Anne, there is clearly a sense that she is searching for something. Meanwhile, whereas Anne is searching for a community that she has never really had, the narrator of *Voix* is searching for something that she has lost: her relationship with her father, a sense of belonging, and a sense of agency. These three are linked, because, as Joseph notes, intimate selving is a process “in which embeddedness still encompasses agency.” (2) The narrator, on the other hand, clearly feels helpless in the face of her father’s death. She is commanded by the Organization—of which she is constantly aware and against which she is entirely powerless—to sever her ties with her dead father by burning his letters, because “On ne vit pas avec les morts” (26); for this, she is rebuked by her father’s apparition for killing him a second time (27). She has conserved her father’s letters as a means of maintaining a relational bond with him, as well as to exert some semblance of agency in her relationship with him, but the Organization, the manifestation of colonial power, prohibits her from doing so. Given the emphasis placed by Vietnamese tradition on ancestors and death rituals, the narrator’s inability to properly send off her father is a source of significant trauma. However, her obsession with her father is also a cause of her madness, for it prevents her from engaging in intimate selving with others. She partially solves this problem when she finally manages to say goodbye to her father; this is the moment when she finally feels a “sense of peace” (67). Not only is she able to resolve her conflict over her absence from her father’s deathbed, but she also exercises agency by extinguishing the mantle of fire that surrounds her father’s apparition. However, her healing is not complete, for she still

lacks a community. Unlike Anne, who returned to her native country, the narrator of *Voix* remains in the land of the colonizers, as she is reminded when she encounters the Organization one last time after leaving her father's apparition. Because selving within this context would involve an unequal power relation, the narrator is unable to truly engage in intimate selving (*IS* 12). It is for this reason that the story ends (in the opening chapter of the novel) with the narrator in a mental institution surrounded by other people who crave relational bonds that they, for their own reasons, are unable to form.

### Imprisonment

In addition to exile, both Djebbar and Lê present imprisonment (in actual prisons for Djebbar's characters, and in a mental institution for Lê's narrator) as an impediment to intimate selving, while al-Shaykh presents a more metaphorical form of imprisonment. However, Djebbar presents two very different experiences of imprisonment, both of which differ greatly from the experiences presented in al-Shaykh and Lê's novels. Indeed, Sarah's experience of imprisonment during the revolution is more similar to the experience of exile in *Voix* than it is to Nfissa's experience in the very same prison as Sarah. Like the narrator of *Voix*, Sarah is presented as an isolated figure, but Sarah is actually surrounded by family. Despite her desire to connect with them, "[sa] voix ne les atteint pas" (13).<sup>122</sup> The reason for her isolation, much as with the narrator of *Voix*, is her absence and isolation at the moment of her mother's death. Whereas the narrator of *Voix* was absent and isolated due to exile in the land of the colonizers, Sarah was in prison in her own country, imprisoned by the French colonizers. Upon learning of her mother's death, she realized that her mother had been imprisoned all her life by patriarchy, and upon dying, she had "joined [Sarah] in prison," (*Femmes* 58/*Women* 48), a prison from

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<sup>122</sup> "[her] voice doesn't reach them" (7)

which Sarah could imagine no escape (*Femmes* 57/*Women* 47). Indeed, when Sarah was finally released from prison, she found that her fears were true; despite the proclamation of a “free” Algerian republic, she asks herself, “cette liberté-là, est-elle vraiment à moi?” (60).<sup>123</sup> Though she is no longer enclosed in the walls of Barberousse, she is constantly reminded of her status as an outsider; as a woman, she is denied full membership in the network of male selves that constitutes the Algerian nation. Whereas the narrator of *Voix* is constantly assailed by the voices of the Organization, Sarah is troubled by her inability to reach others with her own voice. In both cases, however, the women are troubled by their lack of agency. Sarah finds herself unable to express her fears and desires to her family, particularly her husband. She has “always had a hard time with words” (*Femmes* 55/*Women* 45), and her voice “stays inside” (*Femmes* 13/*Women* 7). Though she contributed to the national cause, she is unable to speak of it and thus claim her part in the national community (*Femmes* 43/*Women* 34). The narrator of *Voix*, on the other hand, is compelled by the voice of the colonizers, the Organization, to do harm to herself and to isolate herself from her father and her roots. Like Sarah, she finds herself in a place where she is disempowered, but for her it is the colonizer’s society that oppresses her, not the men of her own nation. Regardless, both women are unable to engage in intimate selving because of unequal power dynamics.

Though Sarah suffers from her imprisonment in Barberousse and the narrator of *Voix* finds herself imprisoned within French society, Nfissa is actually able to engage in intimate selving while imprisoned during the Algerian Revolution. This happens specifically because Nfissa and her comrades—a group that includes two non-Muslim French women—make a conscious decision to erase any power differential among

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<sup>123</sup> “this freedom, is it really mine?” (50)

themselves. By sharing equally in the experience of the Ramadan fast and its associated rituals, “exile and chains had become immaterial,” and “peace of mind superseded the gray hours... the evening song, despite the guards, seemed to clear the distance across the sea, to reunite them with their country’s mountains” (*Femmes* 132/*Women* 120). These six prisoners were able to overcome the ills of exile—the separation from their community—and the physical and psychic damage of imprisonment by creating a community based on agency and on a non-hierarchical power dynamic.

Nadjia’s imprisonment is perhaps the most pernicious of the three that Djébar presents, for it is imposed upon her not by the French colonizers, but by her father. As she tells Nfissa, “Moi aussi, je me souviens! Si toi, tu as connu la prison, moi je l’ai connue aussi, mais ici même, dans cette maison que tu trouves merveilleuse” (133).<sup>124</sup> By preventing Nadjia from finishing her schooling, her father has instituted a hierarchical power structure and limited Nadjia’s agency, thus inhibiting her ability to engage in intimate selving with him. Indeed, she finds herself unable to engage in intimate selving with the other women in the family as well, for she feels the need to compete with her sisters and mother. In addition to insisting that her suffering was equal to or greater than Nfissa’s, Nadjia also competes with the other women for the most sincere fast: “Jeûner dans les rires et la joie! Déclara-t-elle, faussement gaie. Mon carême comptera double!” (133).<sup>125</sup> Rather than sharing equally in the suffering of the war and the joy of Ramadan, Nadjia feels impelled, due to her paternal oppression, to find some way of placing herself in a superior position to that of the other (equally oppressed) women in the family.

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<sup>124</sup> “I remember too! You may have been imprisoned, but I too was in prison, right here, in this very house you think is so wonderful” (121)

<sup>125</sup> “‘Fasting with laughter and joy,’ she declared with false cheer, ‘My fast will count doubly!’” (120)

Though Sarah also has difficulty relating to her family and to other women in her community, it is not due to hierarchical structures directly put in place by any member of her family, but rather due to the general gendered hierarchy of post-revolutionary Algeria. This is not to say that her husband Ali is not complicit in the oppression of women; he is seen mocking the water carrier from the *hammam* for refusing surgery on religious grounds.<sup>126</sup> However, there is no evidence that Ali oppresses Sarah directly. Rather, her oppression comes from a general restriction on women's voices and freedoms in Algerian society following the revolution. This oppression is evident in Baya's assertion that "[m]any women can only go out to the baths" (*Femmes* 38/*Women* 30). However, more important than the restrictions on women's movement is the restriction on women's voices. For Sarah, the wounds of war are constituted primarily as an obstacle to the formation of women's communities. The supposed freedom enjoyed by women in post-war Algeria is illusory, because women do not share freely of themselves. It is for this reason that Sarah feels compelled to ask herself if her freedom really belongs to her (*Femmes* 60/*Women* 50). True freedom can only come with the unblocking of barriers between women through "[l]a femme-regard et la femme-voix" (*Femmes* 61/*Women* 50). Women's healing must consist of two parts: first, women must take advantage of spaces dedicated to their use: "the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects" (*Femmes* 60/*Women* 50) to share their stories reciprocally. The other part of healing is to link women to the greater community of Algeria, to "[l]ook outside, look outside the walls and the prisons" (*Femmes* 61/*Women* 50). In this respect, though the form of imprisonment differs from the one experienced by Nfissa, the means of

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<sup>126</sup> "Quelles croyances? rétorqua Ali rudiment. Lève-toi donc et pars, si tu le désires: tu ne pourras plus alors travailler de cette main" (45)./ "What beliefs?" Ali retorted roughly. "So get up then and leave if you want, but you'll not be able to work again with your hand in that shape" (36).

healing is very similar; Nfissa and her comrades also healed their wounds by forming a community within the prison and by making a psychic journey beyond the walls of the prison, “across the sea, to reunite them with their country’s mountains” (*Femmes* 132/*Women* 120).

Finally, we must examine the ways in which Lebanese society imprisons Zahra both before and during the war. In some ways, her pre-war experience bears similarities to Nadjia’s experiences during the Algerian Revolution. Like Nadjia, Zahra is subjected to patriarchal oppression. Rather than being denied schooling, Zahra is denied equal status to her ne’er-do-well brother Ahmad; this is particularly evident in the distribution of food.<sup>127</sup> However, whereas the other women of Nadjia’s family have created a supportive network, Zahra has no such network. Nadjia suffers because she refuses to see herself as part of her familial network, whereas Zahra suffers because she has no such network. Her mother is complicit in the enforcement of gender inequality, and she is also seen putting Zahra in dangerous positions by bringing her along on her extramarital trysts. The physical abuse that Zahra witnesses and experiences throughout her childhood and her marriage (rape and beatings in particular) lead her to engage in self-destructive behavior; she intentionally harms her body and spends time in a mental hospital as a result of her inability to relate to others. Here we see similarities to the narrator of *Voix*: exiled in a country where she has little to no support from others, she harms herself at the behest of the Organization and, despite her best efforts, ends up in a mental hospital surrounded by other people who have gone mad due to a lack of intimate selving.

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<sup>127</sup> “Every day, as we sat in the kitchen to eat, [my mother’s] love would be declared: having filled my plate with soup she serves my brother Ahmad, taking all her time, searching carefully for the best pieces of meat. She dips the ladle into the pot and salvages meat fragments. There they go into Ahmad’s dish. There they sit in Ahmad’s belly.” (11)



However, the narrator of *Voix* is driven to madness and self-destruction by exile, whereas Zahra is, in a way, imprisoned by her family. Though she has a certain degree of freedom of movement, her rights and her voice are severely restricted. During her stay with her uncle in Africa, she does not truly experience the pain of exile because she has not lost any true homeland or relational network. The abuse that she experiences in Africa is very much like the abuse that she experienced in Lebanon, and she therefore does not experience “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (Said 137), for she has no “true home.” Her self is in a state of perpetual rift, even before her exile, and unlike the narrator of *Voix*, she has not left behind anyone with whom she had a profound connection. Moreover, it is important to note that Zahra’s wounds begin before the war, whereas the narrator of *Voix*, like the other characters examined here, does not appear to have experienced any major psychic wounding until after the lived experience of warfare. For Zahra, on the other hand, the war does not truly change her situation significantly. Rather, the physical dangers and toxic relationships that she experienced before the war simply become more widespread and, as cooke argues, they become the norm not only for Zahra, but for the rest of the country.<sup>128</sup> However, contrary to cooke’s argument that Zahra “finds peace from within the logic of the war” (WOV 50), this normalization of trauma does not constitute a form of healing for Zahra; rather, it constitutes a continuation of her previous physical and psychic abuse. This is not to say that the war is not traumatic for Zahra; however, the damage that she experiences during the civil war is due not only to the war but also to the failure of her society to create a healthy space for her. Though the other characters in the

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<sup>128</sup> “The sounds of the bullets and the bombs finally shaped an external reality that Zahra could not relegate to hazy otherness... It forced others... to act as she had: to withdraw. It made her withdrawal normal.” (WOV 54)

works studied here experienced comparable violence during their respective wars, there is evidence of support networks: the women in Djébar's short stories have friends and family who attempt to create nurturing networks for them, and the narrator of *Voix* clearly saw her relationship with her father as an important part of her life, and the loss of this relationship wounds her deeply. Zahra, however, has no such networks or relationships. The closest relationship depicted in the novel is her obsessive relationship with her mother, which is clearly neither healthy nor nurturing. Without relational networks, Zahra finds herself looking in dangerous places for companionship; most notably, she reaches out to the sniper, who ultimately kills her because she gets too close to him.

## **Conclusion**

The intent of this dissertation is not to propose intimate selving as a one-size-fits-all approach to healing, nor is it to propose that other approaches to healing are incorrect. Rather, it is to demonstrate that intimate selving is one of many issues that come into play in the healing process and to illustrate the complexity of healing through intimate selving. This study examined four texts by three different authors, each from a different war; it goes without saying that these texts cannot possibly capture the diverse experiences of women in warfare. They do, however, give the reader an idea of the different ways in which women may be affected by war, as well as the different ways in which they may cope with their war experiences. In particular, it demonstrates an extension of the current discourse on memory and testimony as means of healing, particularly in the fiction of Assia Djébar. It illustrates instances when memory and testimony are insufficient for

healing when they do not result in intimate selving, and it illustrates ways in which memory and testimony can be used as tools in the pursuit of intimate selving. It also offers a reading of *The Story of Zahra* that breaks with the interpretation offered by miriam cooke. Whereas cooke defines Zahra's healing in terms of a resolution between her internal and external reality,<sup>129</sup> I argue that Zahra does not experience any form of healing during the war because the war offers no possibility of intimate selving. Finally, this study offers a reading of Linda Lê that breaks from the autobiographical readings that dominate Lê scholarship, suggesting instead an interpretation of Lê's narrator based solely on textual, rather than biographical, evidence.

It is also important to note that this is not a sociological or psychological study. This is a study of literary representations of war and its effects on women's psyches. Though I draw on the work of sociologists and historians, this is first and foremost a work of literary criticism. That said, this dissertation does illustrate the ways in which women's writing about warfare reflects the historical and social contexts in which the works are produced. Indeed, this is a somewhat innovative approach to these texts, as much of the existing criticism focuses on the social implications of writing and treats textual analysis as secondary. (Some examples of this are Accad, Budig-Markin, Donadey, Gracki, and Orlando's writings on Djébar's fiction as a means of resistance to male domination, cooke's inclusion of al-Shaykh among the Beirut Decentrists, and the overwhelming concern about Lê's life and the influences of her own experiences on the structure and content of her narratives).

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<sup>129</sup> "The sounds of the bullets and the bombs finally shaped an external reality that Zahra could not relegate to hazy otherness... It forced others... to act as she had: to withdraw. It made her withdrawal normal." (WOV 54)

This study is hardly complete; indeed, there are numerous other texts from these three wars alone that merit examination within the context of intimate selving. It was my original intent to include other texts by Djebbar, al-Shaykh, and Lê, as well as texts from Algerian novelist Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Lebanese-Canadian playwright and novelist Abla Farhoud, and Vietnamese memoirist Kim Lefèvre. Moreover, there are several other wars that merit study. Korean-American novelist Nora Okja Keller has written about both the Pacific War and the Korean War, and there are numerous texts from the Israel/Palestine conflict, the Rwandan civil war and genocide, as well as the violence that resulted from the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. Each of these historical and cultural contexts will further complicate our understanding of the different ways in which intimate selving is and is not used as a mode of healing. Moreover, as this research project was being carried out, a wave of uprisings swept through North Africa and the Middle East; these events will no doubt produce an ample body of literature that can further contribute to our understanding of healing and postcolonial warfare. Finally, there remains the question of future literary output from these wars. This study focused on writers who experienced the impact of the wars at first hand. Given that the effect of wars can impact communities for generations after the end of a war, it would be interesting to examine the ways in which future generations employ intimate selving as a means of healing.

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